Religion, Politics and Modernity

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This paper will make a case for an understanding of the relations between religion and political processes in India through a form of historical sociology. In doing so I shall make some critical remarks about the usual ways in which the two disciplines most concerned with the problem of communalism have actually gone about their analysis- the disciplines of politics and history. Political scientists usually put the problem beyond any possibility of explanation by avoiding a historical perspective. Historians do usually bring in a longer term perspective, but fail often to disentangle this from anachronistic and presentist assumptions. The most common procedure is to speak of religious communities unworriedly in a language of majorities and minorities. This is misleading, because, I shall argue, before the coming of the modern cognitive processes, to speak of this language is inappropriate, and it does not respect the identity of the past to be different. Both of these are in their differing ways presentist views, the first distorted by its self imposed limitation, the second long term but misleadingly anachronistic.

It is of course assertable that all sociology is historical. But to understand what religion is doing in contemporary Indian politics we need a historically oriented thinking for two more specific reasons. First it is impossible to judge a modern social practice without some comparison with past ones, specially without analysing what a practice with a similar name used to do in past social forms. Secondly, it is necessary because of the peculiar temporality of social objects which populate our lived world. Practices, institutions, ideas are hardly ever homogeneous in temporal terms: their different layers and components do not come from an identical period in history. Like the materials things amongst which we live, our social world is also of a complex temporal structure; things which exist today at the same time did not originate together, and would not disappear at the same time. To respect this differential structure of temporality we must get beyond the easy and misleading impression of functional connectedness that simple contemporaneity imposes on them. To take an example from an

idea I shall use later, one of the major features of modern Indian history is the coevality of the colonial and the modern. But evidently it is essential to resist the temptation to treat them as equivalent and interchangeable; and it makes a great deal of difference whether we see communalism as a consequence of colonialism or something that is linked to processes of modernity. If the first, communal politics should have lost its power after independence. If the second, then the continuation of communal politics after freedom, albeit in an altered form, would not be wholly surprising. In this paper I shall not try to offer a general analysis of the relation between religion, modernity and politics, but bring into discussion an element often left out of consideration. The claim is not that it explains the emergence of communal politics, but the far more modest one that without some consideration of this no explanation can succeed.

An essential part of this story is to find the logic of modernity's reconstitution of identity. This logic consists of two distinct parts or processes. Modernity, as is well known, brings in a new logic of self-determination, which means in this context literally, determination of the self, choosing what one would be. But again there are two sides to this act of self-determination. First, there are wholly new types of belonging which modernity renders possible. Identities like modern national ones were not available in a world that existed before. But it also makes possible, often even obligatory, people's "having" their earlier identities in an altogether different way. Thus the meaning of "being a Muslim" or a Hindu might change fundamentally, though the continuation of the phrase as a description of practical being produce a misleading impression of continuity. It is not as if people were not Muslims before, but they were not Muslim in the same way; or rather, the significance of their being Muslim was not the same, precisely because it was a social world which lacked this accent on being something. That world admitted a great deal of cognitive and philosophical reflexivity; but this kind of political being or reflexivity is a new thing. It is also worth considering whether the normal critical associations of the term reflexivity should be applied at all to this mode of political being.

To understand how modernity transforms individual and collective identities it is essential to reconstruct the structure of identity in pre-modern societies. Of course, in empirical terms, this can only be done by historians, because pre modernity may refer to very differ-

ent things in differing social contexts, utterly dissimilar social formations might be brought misleadingly together by their common property of being replaced by a uniform modernity. But historians have not been centrally interested in this question till recently. Thus it is possible to grope towards some understanding of this by a process of negative inference. Since we know what modern identities, at least descriptively are like, we can think out what aspects of these identities would have been unavailable to inhabitants of earlier societies. If we cannot establish firmly that they must have thought in a particular fashion, we can at least affirm that there were certain things which could not have figured in the way they imagined their social world.

Among the many transformations brought in by modernity I shall take up only two. I have argued elsewhere that the introduction of western rationalist education in India bifurcated the society's common-sense, and divided Indian culture in a radically different and unprecedented fashion. Indian culture had traditionally been marked by great internal inequality and distance: between the literate and unlettered, between practical users of literacy and its ritual users, between different castes because their ways of carrying and using literacy was different. Despite this, despite the various inflections and articulations by divergent groups it was identifiably a single common sense, held together within the confines of a common discourse or conceptual alphabet which groups used opportunistically for their particular aims. Erudite Brahmins and illiterate shudras may offer prayers to their deities in mutually inaccessible ways (because the shudra would not know Sanskrit, the Brahmin would not descend from it into vernaculars); but they would have shown an implicit agreement that praying constituted a vital and inescapable activity in their arrangement of social life. Each would understand the practice, if not the exact manner in which it was performed.

Introduction of western education decisively shattered this integral single common sense of traditional culture by inducting a new kind of common sense based on rationalist premises common in nineteenth century Europe. It created two separate discourses about the social and political worlds. This was reinforced by the symbolic association of these two conceptual languages with the natural languages of English and Indian vernaculars. English was regarded by the first modernisers as the indispensable language of science, legality, administration, and generally of the historically

unfamiliar "public life" which British administration had brought with itself. Bengali babus, for instance, warmly welcomed its unfamiliar principles, and imposed them on a society going through rapid and unclear transformation to disallow access to women and the lower classes. This created a strange dichotomy of inside and outside, of the home and the world, of the rationalist world of politics and the sentimental one of domesticity created essentially by generalising upon the experience of the middle class. English was regarded as the language of the outside, the public space, of control, of easy and effortless domination of the upper orders against the vernacular muteness of the women and the lowly. Thus the first Bengali babus spoke Bengali at home, increasingly apologetically. In his public contexts of his office, or in public discussions he discoursed in English, which in any case was also a requirement for career advance in the colonial bureaucracy. Subsequently, in Bengali and other languages of India, there were distinguished and determined attempts to break down this barrier, and to make the vernacular perform those exalted functions which modernists had reserved for English. Bankimchandra and Rabindranath both wrote about science in Bengali and gradually created a syntax more suited to modern discursive reasoning; and the great significance of these performances was to prove that one could engage in intellectual modernity in vernaculars, to show that modern and English speaking were not necessary equivalents. Yet, in institutional terms, this fatal connection between modernity and westernism and English language remained. There remained thus a fundamental connection between the modernist way of conceiving and being in the world and using English, the basic symbolic connection between the conceptual and natural languages.

Colonial modernity brought along a more silent but no less fundamental process of change. I have called it one of enumeration: the transformation of a small, approximate, tentative conception of the social universe into the typical modem image of mapped and counted identities. It is sobering to notice that it is the process of census which creates majorities and minorities and imprints them indelibly on the mind of social groups, much before democracy arrives. Besides, the majorities of democracy are, in principle at least, random and momentary, bound to change quickly in the exigencies of the next vote. The majorities of the census, given the logic of modem politics, hold a permanent menace, and correspondingly subject the minorities to constant reminders of an equally

permanent helplessness. This process of objectification of communities, to use Bernard Cohn's terms, had incalculably far reaching consequences for the making and remaking of political identity, including religious ones. To appreciate the enormity and the specific character of this change it is necessary to make some remarks about the structure of identity in pre-modern times. I have marked this contrast by a distinction between fuzzy and enumerated communities, using communities in the indeterminate meaning of any social group to which an individual relevant belongs, roughly equivalent to the ways in which many Indian languages would use the term *Samaj*. Samaj, in traditional Bengali, before the language developed modem aspirations and therefore entered into an enormous search for Sanskrit equivalents for English concepts, meant any relevant social group, any acknowledged belonging. The word fuzzy has its own problems, but it has to do a lot of work in my argument. Fuzziness indicates several interconnected features indicating a lack of clarity or objectification in terms of space and the geographical distribution of social groups. It also indicates unclarity in terms of numbers. In traditional society, although one vaisnava would recognise another, and would thus feel closer to him than to others, they had no means of asking and of knowing how many of them existed, and what they could do for their common benefit by undertaking concerted actions. While their conceptual apparatus had considerable precision for identifying themselves and others, its precision was not adapted to modem types of collective action in political life. It is the actual possibility of such collective action or the threat of their imminent mobilisation that constitutes an essential feature of modem politics. Finally, social differences were organised in a fuzzy fashion in still another sense - in their actual geographic organisation. Linguistic dialects illustrate this logic of difference. Although it is easy to notice that dialects change slowly as we move from one area to another, it is hard to point out precise boundaries between them. The organisation of this difference is more like a colour spectrum, rather than of clearly differentiated objects with precise linear frontiers.

By implication, although such differences are real, in a world of transitions of this kind, unlike in a world of boundaries, on both sides of the border there would remain a fair degree of neighbourly comprehensibility. Political conflicts are likely to be less intense, in any case, when the boundary between the self and the other is unclear.

The major question about politics of course refers to the social relation between Hindus and Muslims as religious communities. It is essential to examine this closely for two reasons. The first stems from our hypothesis that modernity not only makes new identities possible, it does not leave older ones alone. Indeed, identities which existed in a different mode earlier undergo a crucial, though often undeclared transformation, becoming old identities of a new type. It is essential to ask if people's way of being Hindus and Muslims changed. The second reason for examining this question has to do with the dominance of nationalist habits of thinking in our social science discussions. Some basic premises of nationalist thinking arc so widely influential that they make us forget that these are representations of an historical reality, and thus subject to critical tests.

Communalist ideas are widely criticised and rejected in India but this is done most often from unexamined nationalist positions. Its first premise is the connection that it establishes between the rise of communal politics and British colonial policy, an argument admittedly of undeniable plausibility. However this argument can be stated in several different forms. First, it can be advanced as a simple intentional explanation making this appear as a conspiracy of the colonial administration to continue its tenure by fatally dividing the indigenous people. Alternatively, it could also be seen as an inevitable part of the modernist reconstitution of identity which colonial rulers used to their benefit. A corollary of the nationalist picture is its usually flattering picture of the pre-colonial past. Nationalists sometimes come close to asserting that pre-colonial India had developed strong traditions of secular political authority. Evidence in support of this view is marshalled in three mutually supporting ways.

It is often suggested that after the entry of Islamic groups, after the initial military skirmishes the two great religious cultures evinced civilised curiosity about each other, and through the deliberate ideology of enlightened figures like Amir Khusro and the more complex rationality of popular religious imagination there emerged in time the great cult of our nationalist imagination a "composite culture". Much of course depends on what we put into this ambiguous term. Nationalists themselves meant by this at least two interconnected ideas. To them, this process gave rise to new cultural forms into which earlier specifically Hindu or Muslim forms were sublimated, and which it would be misleading to call by a religious proper name. One of the most appropriate examples of

this would be Hindustani classical music. Secondly, they also mean by a composite culture the habitually peaceable existence of the two communities without much persistent hindrance to each other's religious observances, and the appointment of individuals from both communities into administrative positions, which were observable features of pre-colonial history. But what is particularly misleading is the extreme implication often carried with this view that medieval, especially Mughal India had developed a secular public space, and this was disrupted by malicious colonial practice. Colonial policy was driven no doubt by less than idealistic motives, but equally surely, there was no prior public space and secularism for colonialism to destroy.

The actual historical record would fit a somewhat modified picture of the relation between communities. Indian society was characterised by a type of social organisation (this is an argument running through such diverse thinkers as Marx and Tagore) which accorded to the state less centrality than the standard European practice. The state that existed in this kind of marginality to the social organisation of castes was moreover a segmentary structure, without a clear locus of sovereign power. Political authority was segmented between local structures of power based on control over land and resources of temples, regional kingdoms which, despite constantly fluctuating frontiers had some stable cultural significations, and a distant, grand, occasional empire whose existence was both spectacular and marginal at the same time. The essential productive and ritual order of castes did not depend on the state's sanction directly, and therefore, by corollary, it was not within the state's power to destroy. The longevity of the caste system has been attributed sometimes to its relative autonomy from the political order. The insecure destiny of states in India did not affect the stability of the productive order of castes. The very different rhythms of the political and productive arrangements in Indian society amply demonstrate this fact.

Thus the state can be said metaphorically to occupy a central place on the high ground in the middle of a circle of local communities which continued their quotidian existence without much assistance or interference from the political authority. Historically, Hindu society had shown a peculiar ability to absorb and culturally assimilate groups which entered its fold from outside, even with military power. Islam was the first exception. Islamic groups had much greater cultural self confidence, and clearer self-recognition in

terms of doctrines and observances. This prevented an absorption into Hindu society in the treacherously insidious way that had been the common fate of earlier intruders. But Indian Islam eventually developed many peculiarities which must be put down to its constant trans-active relation with indigenous religious forms. (it is misleading for several reasons to call this indigenous religions Hindu; Al Biruni for instance calls it a Brahmanical religion which is indeed a much better, sociological, description.) The fact that political authority lay with an Islamic groups made it impossible for Brahmanical society to ignore it entirely. Thus the insidious aggrandisement of Hindu religious practice, which dissolved other social identities without their realising it, did not succeed against the Islamic culture. Gradually, indigenous society allowed the two types of Islamic groups - the military entrants and the large masses of indigenous converts - to settle down into exclusive groups or circles of their own, obeying in an indirect sense the exclusivistic logic of Hindu social order. This also allowed Hindus to treat Muslims specialising in particular trades or crafts as quasi-castes, religious identity for itself and caste for others, which assisted this absorption into the segemtary circle of circles structure. Nationalist thinking represented this process somewhat onesidedly, emphasising in effect a self-congratulatory view of hindu tolerance, and implying that a secular public sphere had emerged in pre-colonial India. Since Muslim ruling dynasties came to control the upper layers of political authority(and under their rule the uppermost layer of the empires became distinctly more stable and substantial), but Hindu groups controlled commercial, craft and other productive practices, this required from both groups an effective protocol of trans-active relations for the prosecution of everyday business. But it a typically modernist misjudgement to believe that such transactions in mundane matters like commerce and administration this formed the base of a culture which became wholly mixed in every respect. Evidently, there were some well understood rules of "inside' and 'outside' realms, and the transactions were strictly restricted to the outside ones. The familial and domestic space, which is the most intimate, sacred, and fundamental for group self-identity, remained entirely exclusive in the manner of the dominant logic of caste society. Also because the mundane is less important than the sacred for pre-modern mentalities, the significance of such transactions was comparatively meagre. The sacred, for both communities, remained largely exclusive and unmerged, and intol-

erant of excessive contact, despite the efforts of the remarkable line of bhakti saints and sufi mystics to produce syncretic forms. But their aesthetic achievements were more substantial than their social influence. Their extra ordinariness consists precisely in the rarity of what they attempted and achieved rather than their ability to restructure everyday practices on a general scale. Rather, orthodox Hinduism succeeded in most cases in re-absorbing these reform religions and bringing them back into a slightly modified caste order.

Thus, because the sacral was higher than the mundane, the temple and the mosque, the household puja and namaz remained more significant than the market and the court; and these interactions did not result in the creation of a public space under the state's control. The neighbourliness of the two communities remained a back to back phenomenon - which can be a meaning of the term composite culture. In religious matters the two communities used their most powerful weapons against their competitors. Islam's egalitarian appeal to the lower castes in the Hindu order was sought to be answered by the Hindus by imposing the whole series of humiliating disabilities of untouchablity to the convert. Islamic orthodoxy also often mounted pressure on rulers for more energetic conversion of infidels, which most of the statesmanly princes ignored. The two communities retained their distinctness, unlike, say, in England where Normans and Saxons mixed into a distinctly new indiscernible identity. Yet the historical record seems to indicate a remarkable low degree of organised violence, if we do not count the violence necessarily accompanying princely wars. Nationalist history in India put this down to the principles of unity in diversity, or mutual tolerance, and thus a conscious decision of their leaders to create a composite culture. I feel this was more due to the logic of social organisation and the fuzziness of the world of communities. Religious difference might have given rise to social conflict, but the social world was not structured in a way that these could not assume forms of modem violence.

Colonialism brought into this world of small scale the rationalist logic of enumeration in the two related processes of census and mapping. Originally, this was associated with the effort of colonial administrators to have a better understanding of their political task; but its unintended consequences were far reaching. It fundamentally altered the logic of community identities. Members of social groups and communities are counted with a terrifying finality, and

later with the greater statistical virtuosity of the modern state even their rates of growth established. Spatial distribution of communities becomes clear, along with the bewildering diversity of identities in which people could place themselves. Indeed, one of the features of a modern condition is the relative deliberateness with which can choose their identities, can decide who they are. The change that modernity brings to identity is paradoxical. Traditional identities like caste and religion are altered by the forces of modernity, and especially the demands of modern politics of numbers. But it is a new type of identity, entirely produced by the modern imagination, which submerges them all - the new, constructed, willed, imagined community of the nation. Other identities are still at work inside this process of apparent submergence: the power of religious sense of violation in Indian nationalism should not be underestimated. It is not only the putative nation which feels strengthened by this counting process; all other traditional identities are equally submitted to its power. In the creation of Pakistan we can see how religious identity can submerge the national in itself in a curious inversion of the Indian case. With a slight turn of history, all such identities can come to the foreground with amazing rapidity.

What is generally considered the tolerant practices of traditional Hinduism had a deep connection therefore with the fuzziness of communities, their existence in a world of transitions rather than of boundaries, and consequent overlaps between the self and the non-self in such a world. To use the language of modernity anachronistically about this world, it was a world of minorities, because this world was not governed by form of politics which would make statistical majority a vital principle of advantage. It is deeply misleading therefore to suggest, even absentmindedly, that there were majorities and minorities before the colonial enumeration process. After this process is completed however, it begins to have perceptible effects on the people wear their identifies. While it would have been misleading to speak of the diverse practices of Brahmanical society as a single Hindu religion, after the social world is reconstituted(not merely re-described) through this publicly available knowledge, there appear self conscious proposals to restructure Hinduism into a more organised single religion. Initially, the practical point of this proposal is to oppose Christianity and the pressures of cultural colonialism, but at the centre of such proposals lay a clear appreciation of the logic of modernist politics -

a refashioning of the community to refashion the world. Formerly, religious groups rarely spoke in the language of a collective interest; now it speaks no other language except the collective advantage of the collective self.

These changes are also intimately connected with an alteration of social cognition, the kind of necessary knowledge which people have about their society, and which they employ in their everyday social practices. Modern politics is a politics of numbers both in its democratic and authoritarian forms. It is necessarily related some changes in the cognitive regimes of societies. The cognitive changes associated with enumeration were of course the creation of educated Europeans initially, assisted later on by the educated Indians who were gradually inducted into this cognitive regime and its standard ways of conceptualising the social world. Though this reconstitution of the social world was thus the product of a historically specific form of knowledge and its practical application, its consequences were not limited to the educated or to those who had access to its procedures and intricacies. It transformed the picture of the social world of the subaltern classes with equal if not greater finality, precisely because they were not equipped with the techniques by which dissenting individuals could critically reflect on its political effects. Poorer, illiterate people did not take part in the adumbration or administration of this project, but they were equally subject to its consequences. 'Their world were also marked indelibly by these fatal lines of distinction. Interestingly, illiterate Hindus and Muslims may not be able to count, but they soon came to know with precision how members of majority and minority communities should behave in modern political life. Colonial policy contributed to a constant exacerbation of frictions between religious communities through several overt and subliminal process. Administrative decisions like separate electorates showed the basic trend of British thinking on this matter. But subtler processes of re-description of past conflicts as communal differences also created the atmosphere for the emergence of communal politics in the last phase of colonial rule. The most fundamental damage to political imagination was done perhaps by the idea, underlying partition that minorities can secure themselves only in a state of their own, i.e., only if they have turned themselves into a majority. The equation of democracy with simple majoritarianism is thus not an invention of the modern Hindu communalists, but a gift of British

liberals thinking with appropriate anxiety about the future well-being of their colonial subjects.

The sociological transformation of the nature of religion under the logic of modernity is often seen as rise of fundamentalism, a term used interchangeably in Indian political debates with communalism. Fundamentalism is seen as a resolute retreat from the principles of modernity into the more comprehensible doctrines of tradition, a secure move into the past in the face of modernity's incomprehensibility and sufferings. But this description does not fit communal politics in India, where it is clearly a strategy to get more secure advantages within the arrangements of modern electoral politics. Thus modern communal politics India presupposes the existence of parliamentary electoral arrangements, or at least of the numerical biases of the modern state. Communalism, although it uses religion with great stridency, must be seen as an ironically grotesque part of the historical process of depletion of religious beliefs, of the process Weber called disenchantment.

I should like to argue that traditional secularist theory worked on a simplistic, dualistic picture of the historical process of depletion of religious beliefs often implying that rationalisation leads directly into a secular, atheistic view of the world. Clearly, this model does not fit even western secularisation, and denies the complexities and interruptions of the rationalisation process. In fact, modernity undermines traditional ways of holding religious beliefs by educational practices and modern modes of social and economic life. But this does not lead, except in self-conscious intellectual groups, to a sudden rupture from religious consciousness and a leap into a secular mentality. What happens is a historical process of slow depletion of values. I shall try to portray this by a distinction between a thick and a thin religion. Traditional religious beliefs were thick in the sense that an individual's religious identity were anchored in beliefs spread across a wide variety of levels - from large metaphysical beliefs about the nature of existence, to minute ritual practices in worship, like the wearing of the mark of the particular sect. To take an example from Bengal, shaktas worshipping different forms of shakti and vaishnava devotees of an erotic and youthful Krishna would normally live in neighbourly peace mixed in the same localities, but according to the traditional way of thinking about religion, it is unlikely that they would have seen themselves as practising the same religion. Vaishnavas would disapprove of the spilling of literal or metaphorical blood as part of

the purification of worship. Shaktas would evince reciprocal scorn about the pale vegetarianism of the vaishnava sect and their love of explicit eroticism. Rituals and doctrinal principles again would prevent a gaudiya Vaishnava of Bengal from accepting a South Indian vaishnava as practising an entirely identical religion, though they would both worship forms of Vishnu. This religion is thick because in order to determine someone's religious identity a large number of criteria are apt to be employed. The social consequence of this thick religion is of course a great segmentation of the map of social groups. Traditional believers in vaishnavism and shakta religion would find it impossible to form large coalitions on the basis of their religious beliefs.

The religion of the communalists is by contrast a comparatively thin affair, and many of its most effective political moves must appear ungrammatical to traditional conceptions of identity, sacrality and auspiciousness. During the shilanyas ceremony at the site of the Babri Masjid most political sadhus happily overlooked infringements of the sacred Hindu calendar; but one of the Shankaracharyyas protested on the ground that this showed complete disregard of the distribution of sacred time. This difference of attitude is highly significant. Obviously, the politically inclined Hindu saints obviously considered this a relatively minor matter; and regarded the timing of the event to suit the political calendar an evidently appropriate move. This shows their transposing of the hierarchy of the two times: the sacred calendar is wholly subordinated to the mundane calendar of electoral politics. To the traditional believer, all such mundane temporal arrangements must be subordinated to the structure of sacrality built into the universe itself by its maker. The distinction between ordinary and sacred time is part of the structure of the universe, and it cannot be infringed without turning religion into its travesty. Yet, in order to be politically effective at all, the ceremony had to have a religious character, consecrated by the appropriate codes of language, rituals, moves and metaphors. By conjunction of circumstances, what happened, thus came to have a highly emotional but depleted sacrality in which the invocation of the sacred is essential, but its demands are diluted, its rituals simplified, metaphysical ideas either wholly spurned or held with an astonishing detachment or treated as wholly disposable.

However, if this thin sacrality was used in the sphere of politics alone, its power would have been much less. But the stuff of which

this is made is to be seen in all aspects of daily life in modem India, especially in urban settings and among petty-bourgeois social groups. Education and the daily contact with the structures of modernity have irreversibly disenchanted their worldly imagination, and they have lost for ever the resources for belief in the world of traditional thick religion. The best icon of this thin, displaced, depleted sacrality are the plastic gods placed above the windscreens of the huge metropolitan buses. Traditional religiosity insisted on the distinction between the casred and the profane in respect of space, time, language, even materials out of which icons could be fashioned. Modem life has thinned down and displaced sacrality in all these respects in the most brusque businesslike manner. The plastic deity is wrenched, like his devotee, from the habitual sacred place of inhabitancy in the temple, and forced into an unsuitable mechanical interior. he is a refugee as much as his worshipper. Already the sacrality of the time of worship is infringed; he is to be given an often perfunctory devotion according to the time of convenience, a break in the work rather than at those times of transition (sandhi) which are marked into the eternal architecture of the daily cycle. In the Hindu traditional thought there are also widely understood principles about the construction of idols, a grammar of materials and manners of depiction taken from the intricate disciplines of rasas and mudras. Use of plastic is an obvious violation of this code of sacrality which suggests that images of god can only be made out of materials made by him - stone, wood, clay or metal. The immutability of god's presence is translated into the durability of plastic materials, placing it in the nondescript space between the sacred and the mundane. Nothing shows the ungrammaticality of this modern religion more than the poses of the icons, and the predominant rasa his presence is supposed to evoke. The most drastic example of this violation of iconic grammar is the widespread depiction of Lord Rama in the BJP posters of recent years. Traditionally, Rama's iconic image was that of the dhirodatta nayaka, and his portrayal is in terms of shanta rasa in which he offers the ultimate assurance of a just order to men troubled by the confusing experience of the everyday. His life, depicted every year through thousands of ramlila enactments in India's villages, is of course a story of constant and unremitting provocation. But what he depicts, in that story of aggravation from all angles, is poise, unprovoked quiet, a sense of measure, peace and forgiveness. He is a restorer of moral order, not a perpetrator of revenge. This is why the

icon is dominant over the narrative; the idol shows the principle at the place of rest of the story rather than the agitation of the episodes. That is the essence of the traditional interpretation of Rama's extraordinary narrative. Hindus did not learn of the provocations his life consisted in from L K Advani. Yet his proper image is shanta, because his exemplerity, his godliness consists in not returning violence with violence. Despite his victory over Ravana, the essential element in his life is not violent retribution, but compassion, karuna. In current propaganda material Rama is shown in an unaccustomed warlike pose, with an uplifted bow, an arrow fitted to the string, in the very act of doing violence - albeit in the cause of justice in general and the BJP's formation of government in particular. From the traditional point of view this wrathful Rama is wholly ungrammatical, a complete misunderstanding of the complex narrative and its iconic representation. If he returns violence with irritation and violence he loses his great calm and sense of measured propriety. Instead of acting like an ancient god, he acts like a modem politician. This reinvented Rama, therefore, does not represent tradition, except in a very problematic way.

The political consequences of this process of thinning of religion are quite evident, because this is only a part of a much larger transformation of political experience. Initially the aspirations of nationalist ideology and its unrelenting search for the material advantages of modernity have third world societies continue with the received structures of the colonial state. During the national movement, the colonial state was the primary target of political attack; but after achieving freedom nationalist states have not proposed a return to the earlier, traditional equilibrium of a distant, limited, non-interfering state and a largely segmented, self-determining society. Indeed, the most significant feature of this transition to modernity is the relation of the state to the other institutions of society, the struggling appearance of something resembling sovereignty through the expanding claims of the colonial state. In India, this idea of sovereignty was unprecedented more in terms of its domestic implications, than its external ones. Sovereignty of the state meant of course that other states could not interfere with its internal process of political decision making. Sociologically, however, the more problematic element was the establishment of sovereignty over the "lower" institutions in society, if we apply a misleading metaphor from European history. In the West, this process of crucial subordination of all other temporal authority to

the rule of the modern state was accomplished by the struggles of absolutism against feudal authority. India experienced nothing comparable to that decisive historical process. Given the architecture of social institutions, the descriptions "high" and "low" become misleading in the Indian context. The state could not, by explicit legislation, reorder the structure of castes, the arrangement simultaneously of production and ritual status, thus its authority, though despotic in one sense, was not absolute. But after initial resistance during the colonial period, the society resigned itself, in large measure, to the new relation between the state and other social organisations, to its sovereignty, its right to legislate changes in the fundamental productive and distributive order. It is impossible to reverse this process and revert the modem state back into its earlier position of marginality. As a consequence, all types of social exchanges which happened earlier in the no-state realms, have now to be mediated through the apparatuses of the state. Social groups in India are thus pressed to deal with and bring under their advantageous. c control this leviathan, this large, strange, unfamiliar, faintly threatening animal. At the same time they try to do this by deploying their available repertoire of social actions and identifications.

It is hardly surprising therefore that what happened in political history of India was not a melting away of tradition under the powerful light of modernist enlightenment. Those institutions of modernity, like the state, which had to be accepted as part of the modem condition have been dealt with through a grid of traditionally intelligible patterns of social identity and action. The constitutional system in India therefore was consistent with the internal principles of liberal constitutionalism, but inconsistent with the self-understanding of social groups. The national state simply assumed that citizens would act as liberal individuals, but failed to set in motion a cultural process which would provide the great masses of people the means of acquiring such self-understanding. Naturally, traditional identifications went through a process of adaptation to the modernist logic of electoral politics, giving rise to, unsurprisingly, forms of political behaviour which are indescribable either in terms of liberal politics or traditional operations of power. The logic of adaptation is very similar in case of both castes and religious communities. M N Srinivas had pointed out sometime ago that descriptions like "intermediate castes" were ungrammatical in terms of the traditional logic of the caste system, since the jati

system was highly region specific. In the context of parliamentary politics however these conceptions make eminent sense, because they can help the sub-brahminic groups from various regions to fashion imposing electoral coalitions to press their common economic or other material demands on the state. Srinivas called them "monster castes" to indicate, I suppose, both their ungrammatical quality and their great size and electoral potential. There is an historical dimension to this process which naturally does not figure in the calculations of politicians who engineer this kind of adaptation to the logic of modem politics. What are the likely results of such changes on the structure of caste behaviour in general? Would a politically strong caste become socially increasingly weak, and eventually, perhaps lose its ability to achieve co-ordination of social behaviour? Is it an ironic stage in the ventual historical dilution of caste as social force?

The political use of Hindu religion is exactly similar in some ways. It is a truism that Hindu religion has a sociologically decentralised structure, and it was only under the impulse of colonial modernity that proposals were advanced for a 'semiticised' unitary Hinduism. Indeed, the abstract self-description of all these religious groups as "Hindu" was itself a product of modernity, proposed originally by nationalists who thought Hinduism suffered in comparison with Christianity because of its lack of effective ecclesiastical organisation. Still, this remained an outer layer of their religious self-identification, as people who would have acknowledged that they were "commonly" Hindus, showed no willingness to adopt religious practices that were common, which would supersede their everyday practice as shaivites, vaishnavites or shaktas. The idea of Hinduism itself is quasi-political in origin, in the sense that people did not wish to be Hindus in this abstract sense until they felt a *political* need to do so. It is therefore easy to exploit it for overtly political purposes. What the constitutional category of scheduled or intermediate castes has done in case of caste identity, the thin form of Hinduism can accomplish equally well for religion. It enables its practitioners to propose the establishment of large coalitions, in case of Hinduism, indeed, the largest possible one in Indian society. By its own internal logic, however, this religion must be fundamentally untraditional in several respects. Unlike traditional religion, it is not apolitical, but organises impressive assemblage of world renouncing sadhus to assist in the winning of elections by a communal political party. It must also beutterly

casual about rituals, or the philosophic or doctrinal aspects of religious life. It turns the Durkheimian conception of religious life upside down: instead of valuing the sacred side of life over the mundane; it is willing to make compromises on the side of its sacred practices for securing advantages in politics, the most mundane of all pursuits. Its iconography is vulgar and improper. But its menace in democratic political life is overwhelming, making it attractive to communal political groups.

Since Hinduism is the religion of the majority, this makes it easy for its advocates to speak the language of democracy. But the critical opinion in India has been more concerned with an ideological rejection of Hindu communalism and its recent strength rather than a convincing sociology of its politics. It is curious, in the first place, that communal politics gained strength after about forty years of national government, not immediately after independence. If this was entirely due to the forces of traditionalism, it should have appeared at that time, rather than forty years later during which period forces of modernity had gained enormously in Indian society and economy. This raises doubts about attributing its origins simply to tradition. Evidently, these political forces have much more to do with modernity than is usually conceded by the secularists in India. If this is seen as a process generated by movements of the forces of modernity, the affair becomes less puzzling.

Tocqueville remarked in his classic studies on western trajectories that although in the French case, modem democratic politics was accompanied by a decline of religious influence in public life, it was more likely in societies with a strong religious culture that democratic politics would show the imprint of popular religious notions. With any spread of democracy a certain degree of laicisation of politics was inevitable. In India as well, to speak in Tocqueville's terms, the functioning of democracy slowly brought on a democratisation of society - the decline of the cultural deference in which the lower classes held the more privileged, educated ones. As ordinary people grasped the great significance of numbers in electoral politics, it was also not surprising that increasingly, from the lower levels of political institutions, beginning with the panchayats, a new style of functioning came to be represented in the political arena which was less dominated by English language, less observant about the stipulations of liberal parliamentary norms. As these politicians had no direct access to the knowledge of western parliamentary styles of governance, they simply translated these

unfamiliar, and in any case abstract, principles into terms more comprehensible in terms of rural life. Since the sixties, Indian politics has seen a massive alteration in style, language, modes of behaviour, reflecting far more the actual cultural understandings of rural Indian society rather than the westernist cultivation of the elite which inherited power in the Nehru years. But this was compounded by the forgetfulness and negligence of the Nehruvian state itself about the process of the cultural reproduction of the nation.

It not merely failed to create conditions for a common sense in Indian politics, through which liberal, secular political ideas could be communicated dialogically to them, rather, its neglect of cultural institutions like primary education contributed to a further division between a westernist English-using social aristocracy and a disadvantaged vernacular culture condemned to backwardness and self-deprecation. Ironically, the material benefits of modernity were gathered in so exclusively by the inhabitants of the English circles of discourse that it gave rise to two wholly understandable reactions in the rest of society. First, of course, it set off a great movement of emulation, through the enormous extension of English medium schools. But the number of those who would benefit from these changes was bound to be quite small, and that merely added to the intense resentment of the others. Since benefits of development were so unequally and unjustly distributed, it prepared ground for two types of political dissent, an economic critique of class and an indigenist critique of modernist cultural privilege. The second kind of resentment has naturally found predominantly cultural expression through regionalist and communal politics, through the politics of Hindi and Hinduism. There is of course no inevitability about this connection between exclusion and modernity; in the nineteenth century most vernacular cultures gave rise to strong modernist argumentation within those vernaculars themselves. But there has been a noticeable evacuation of that vernacular field of discourse in the last two decades by the liberal, secular, modernist, on occasion even leftist intelligentsia. Their abdication of vernacular discourse, their excessive reliance on the state and its increasingly less accountable bureaucracy, and their withdrawal from the dialogic stance of conversation into a more arrogant attitude of peremptory command has created a situation in which forces of Hindu majoritarianism can claim the dignity of cultural self-assertion against a dispensation in which individuals are penalised for speaking their mother tongue or evincing interest in their own culture. An asser-

tion of cultural indigenism is a likely consequence of democracy, and the unwillingness of liberal and left politics in India to allow expression for these impulses has allowed Hindu communal and Hindi chauvinist politicians to appropriate the considerable power of such cultural democracy. The breakdown of the diglossia which characterised the national movement has only accentuated this association of modernity with exclusivism.

However, some contractions of this ambiguous religion, which has been made more strident at the cost of becoming more mundane, can be detected already in the politics of the BJP. Already, quite obviously, communal politics suffers from an acute in-determination of the end and the means- is capturing of government a means of building the Rama temple, or is the slogan of the temple the means to securing victories in elections? This is not an inconsequential difference, as is evident from the emerging frictions within the communal groups themselves, between the political and the revivalist wings. For the political party, the utility of the issue is in keeping it alive, so that the more the temple is delayed the more elections can be won through rhetoric against those who are obstructing its construction. Once the temple is built, this great electoral issue is lost, or has to be rediscovered at some other site. Politicians who would have to run administrations of course immediately appreciate the problems of running a permanent movement. The more religiously inclined wing of the communal groups naturally see the formation of a state government as a means towards the construction of the temple, and naturally see the present as a great theatre of retribution for the imagined desecrations of the past. Given the complexity of Indian's religious history, they can easily produce a long list of such wrongs of the past to be righted, with the dangers of a generalised communal conflict of a kind hardly any electoral politician would find appetising.

Understandably, therefore, there were proposals for a judicious de-radicalisation of the BJP's slogans from groups inside the party itself. When in the seventies communal propaganda seemed to bring in few dividends, and the destiny of the Jana Sangh seemed irreversibly on the decline, some elements inside the party suggested that the party should subtly shift its appeal to the middle class. Instead of the traditional appeal to Hindu chauvinism, it should try to project itself as a substitute for the Congress, asking for support not because of its ideological difference from the Congress, but its similarity, offering a cleaner, more efficient, less

corrupt government. After the dramatic success of the rathayatras, its own agenda was rewritten in a retrograde direction; but it remarkable how clearly, the party has not rejected its other, more secular constituency. Its advertising of support from well-known professionals, its campaign in the English newspapers, occasional electoral arguments from its campaigners that its secularism was more real than the plagiarised westernism of the Nehruvians point to the fact that it continues to appeal to the constituency of modernist groups, though it continues of course with the directly communal appeals to the more traditional Hindu groups. Attacking traditional values in order to undermine this form of politics is not very useful, because it is not a traditional religion. Its roots lie in the contradictions, bewilderments, sufferings and enticements of modernity, but it is a modernity which is already taking a trajectory quite different from the Western one. It is possible that in shifting the line between the sacred and the profane, and playing opportunistically with it, this political religion would erase that distinction itself, and turn eventually to more secular forms of mobilisation. But the example of Iran and some other third world states would urge caution: for it is possible for religious consciousness to acquire a modem ideological form, and stabilise into a historically stable formation of consciousness which can turn against all principles of modernity, including democracy itself.

To understand the problems the depletion of religion might throw in our path, references to western history are of limited utility. It is a task not of statesmanship (which can undoubtedly take care of short term conflicts) but of fashioning a political theory which reflects seriously on the specific trajectory that modernity is taking in Indian history. It cannot be understood as a mere complicated re-enactment of modernity in the west. At the same time, it cannot be understood without reference to it.