

THE NEW POLITICS OF HINDUISM

by Prasenjit Duara

It was an amazing spectacle, and one could have witnessed it almost anywhere in India. In 1989, from every corner of the country Hindus set off on pilgrimages—which in itself would not have been so unusual, except that every person clutched in one hand a single brick. If all those bricks were laid side by side and on top of each other, they would have made an incredible edifice, which was exactly the intention. The thousands of Hindus were on their way to Ayodhya in northern India where they hoped to build a temple, a shrine, to the legendary sage-king Rama at the site of his birthplace. There was but one problem: The site was already occupied—by a 16th-century Islamic mosque.

That a mosque stands on Rama's birthplace has come to symbolize the division between Hindus and Muslims in India. Secular-minded intellectuals have derided the Ayodhya campaign as "brick worship." But Ashok Singhal's nationalistic Hindu organization, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or Universal Hindu Council)—which first startled the country in 1983 when it mobilized Hindus to crisscross the land distributing sacred water from the Ganges—has succeeded in making "Ayodhya" a major issue in Indian politics.

What strikes the historian about the Ayodhya affair is how hard it would be to imagine such a mobilization of Hindus even a mere hundred years ago. For centuries, Muslims and Hindu pilgrims worshipped quietly at the site (the temple to Rama was rebuilt nearby). What we call Hindu or Hinduism today was not a par-

ticularly meaningful category in those days. At first, the VHP, founded in 1964, had little success in bringing together the different sects and religious groups that are involved in the Ayodhya affair today. Few would have predicted that followers of Vishnu, disciples of Shiva, Tantric occultists, and other groups in the "Hindu melange," with their long history of mutual hostility, could come together with such apparent peace under the banner of Hinduism at Ayodhya.

The developments at Ayodhya represent the latest chapter in the century-long emergence of a national or "syndicated" Hinduism. From the outset syndicated Hinduism was a phenomenon more political than religious. Indeed the type of experiences we call "religious"—either routine forms of worship or transcendent spiritual experiences—cannot be easily found in syndicated Hinduism. What brings together the Hindus at Ayodhya is less common religious beliefs and ideas than their shared hostility to Muslims. Syndicated Hinduism also has other, explicitly political goals—such as reversing affirmative-action legislation for Islamic and other minorities in India—by which the VHP and other groups hope to construct a constituency for a pan-Indian Hinduism.

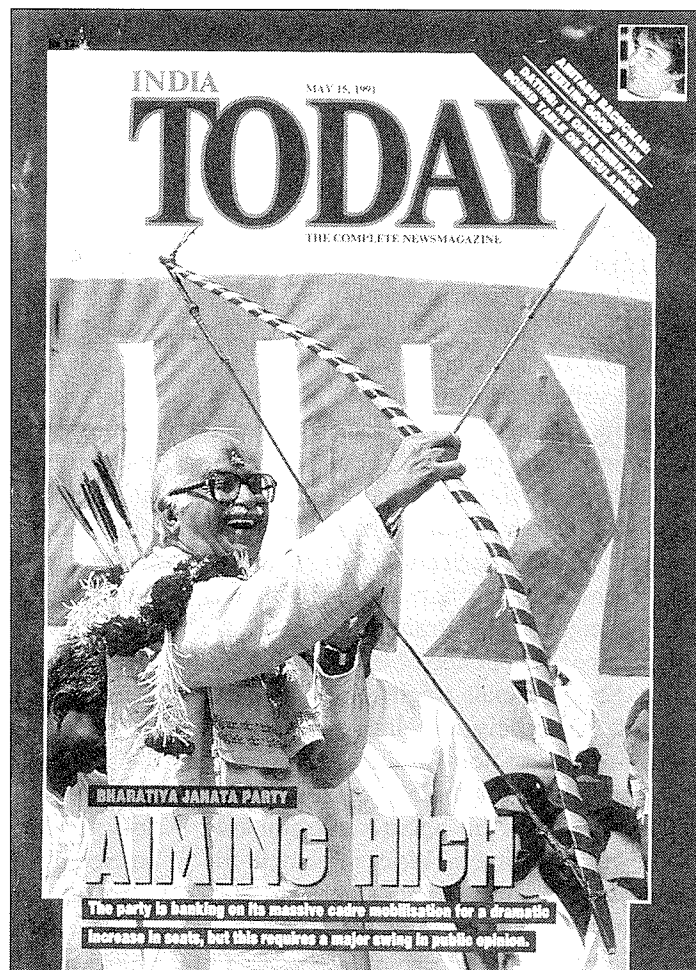
Meaningful religious life in India exists at the level of the sects or divisions of Hinduism. Even the expression "sects of Hinduism" is misleading because Hinduism is not a religion the way other world religions such as Christianity or Islam are. While those religions also have sects, they all have a central reference point, be it the historical founder and his teachings or a single

sacred text. Although latter-day Hindus have attempted to transform the Bhagavad Gita (or some other text) into the religious canon, it is exceedingly difficult to find a text or, for that matter, a practice or even an idea that would be acceptable to all the groups called Hindu. Even such a seemingly ingrained Hindu idea as reincarnation was absent from the ancient Vedas and has been rejected by numerous groups, such as the Charvakas in the sixth century B.C., the medieval Kapalikas, and 19th-century Hindu reformers like Ram Mohun Roy.

Although its origins may be traced to European Orientalists, the new monolithic Hinduism was welcomed by Indian nationalist intellectuals in the late 19th century. The reasons have much to do with the era's emerging systems of nations and nation-states. In the late 19th century, nationalistic Indian intellectuals faced the challenge of unifying their country. The British rulers maintained that India was a mosaic of castes and communities with no national consciousness, held together only by colonial rule. Indian leaders responded to this charge in contradictory ways. Some held that the historical unity of India lay in a common secular culture. Others, however, found it in the shared religious traditions of Hinduism. Although the Indian national movement wrested independence from the British in 1947, neither of these approaches has fully succeeded in integrating

Hindus and non-Hindus into the new Indian nation. John Kenneth Galbraith, former U.S. ambassador to New Delhi, recently observed that ever since independence, India has remained in a state of "suspenseful indecision."

The Indian national movement was Janus-faced with regard to the question of Hinduism. One face of it, the more public and constitutional representatives such as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the nation's first prime minister, and the Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–



In India's 1991 election, the Congress Party pledged stability and the Janata Dal promised caste reform. But L. K. Advani's Hindu-based BJP claimed to speak for "the nation" as a whole.

1941) were committed to secularism. Nehru saw India as a secular nation composed of different communities and religions, each of which had made distinctive historical contributions. Hinduism for him was merely one of the sources of India's greatness, along with Buddhism, the Muslim emperors, and even traditional science. In explaining how the subcontinental polity had become "Indianized," Nehru gave pride of place to the Moghul emperor, Akbar (1542–1605): "Akbar's success is astonishing," Nehru wrote, "for he created a sense of oneness among the diverse elements of north and central India It was not merely an attachment to his person; it was an attachment to the structure he had built." For Nehru, the glorious history of India was the most authentic testimony to the country's capacity to maintain a "unity among diversity." This secularist conception is enshrined in India's constitution and was upheld by Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi and by her son Rajiv.

But the state in India is also subtly implicated with Hinduism. Indeed, the activities of the modern Indian state reveal that the foreign conception of "secularism" has not really taken root in India. Even picking an official language is a problem. The government seeks to derive a common vocabulary from classical Sanskrit—but that is the language of the Brahmanic texts, the language par excellence of Brahmanic Hinduism. State officials might like to think a Sanskrit vocabulary is religiously neutral, but in the eyes of non-Hindus or even non-Brahmans, that vocabulary makes the Indian state appear an agent of Brahmanic Hinduism. Imagine a West in which the wall between church and state was suddenly breached. The use of Latin words in

the English language might likewise be interpreted as Catholic domination.

Recently, All-India Radio sent out a directive to its employees, and particularly the newsreaders-translators in the respective languages, including Hindi, Urdu, and Kashmiri, ordering that *rashtrapati* be used for president, *up-rashtrapati* for vice president, and so on. Those words are Sanskrit, and to groups such as the Muslims of Kashmir, who have begun a campaign for secession from India, the directive sounds suspiciously as though Hindu chauvinists are denying them the right to imagine the nation in their own language. In India's highly charged religious and cultural atmosphere, minorities hardly perceive the state's insistence on using Sanskrit as "secular"; they become even more determined to liberate themselves.

This interplay of Hinduism and national politics has a history, but in many ways it is a peculiarly recent history. In the first half of the 20th century two types of groups were chiefly responsible for the creation of a national Hinduism. First, there were the nationalist intellectuals and leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, who emphasized its most universal and abstract features, seeking to develop a tolerant attitude toward the many other religious groups within India. Quite opposed to them were those who tried to define a Hindu fundamentalism which would clearly demarcate believers from nonbelievers. Syndicated Hinduism as it exists today is the product of these two contradictory tendencies. Today, sadly, most of the universalism and tolerance promoted by Gandhi and others is gone.

The Hinduism of nationalists such as

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Gandhi was drawn essentially from the Brahmanic tradition and capped off by the universalism of the Advaita Vedanta, a radically monastic faith whose central tenet is the unity of all being. The great early designers of national Hinduism who espoused the Vedantic faith were Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950). It was Vivekananda who presented this Hinduism to the West at the Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893. But it was Sri Aurobindo who fashioned Hinduism as the cultural ideology of Indian nationalism. Cambridge-educated, Aurobindo was a charismatic man who reacted violently against his highly Anglicized upbringing, turning initially to revolutionary nationalism and finally ending his days as a Vedantic mystic in the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. For Aurobindo, Indian society differed essentially from that of the West: Western society was permeated through and through with base materialist principles, while Indian caste society was founded on the equitable distribution of spiritual and moral duties. As a revolutionary, Aurobindo did not accept caste as it existed—his was a reformist or even radical agenda—and he regarded socialism as part of the Hindu/Indian order. But, nonetheless, all of his seemingly modern ideas Aurobindo saw as simply fulfilling the divine as conceived by the Brahmanical tradition.

The religious ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, the most important Indian nationalist leader, were uniquely his own. But he was drawn to this tolerant, reforming Hinduism as the cultural and spiritual foundation of Indian nationhood. Thus while Gandhi condemned the “sin” of caste and the “deadlier sin” of Untouchability, he believed in the utopian Hindu ideal of *Rama Rajya* (kingdom of Rama) as the blueprint of India’s new social order. This was to be a patriarchy ruled by an exemplary moral lead-

er, an economic utopia in which reciprocal production ruled out competition and differences in status. Like Aurobindo, Gandhi found his inspiration for a perfect society in a Hindu ideal, but he was able to use it to rally a vast popular following that he yoked to the freedom struggle.

However inclusive these men wished their Hinduism to be, and however necessary it may have been for political mobilization, a national Hinduism so closely associated with Brahmanism was bound to cause problems for both Hinduism and the national movement. And most of the leaders of the national movement were either Brahmans or upper-caste Hindus. Gandhi’s reformist Hinduism and Aurobindo’s mysticism were hardly as virulently exclusive as syndicated Hinduism is today. Yet the creation of Pakistan in 1947 can be traced to the anxieties of a Muslim elite which feared that an independent India would be increasingly Hinduized. National Hinduism also forced those on the borders of the Hindu melange to choose whether they were Hindu or not, and, in certain cases, like that of the Sikhs (who now threaten to secede from the nation) even whether they were Indian or not.

The other major group behind national Hinduism were “fundamentalists” who interpreted strictly what it meant to be a Hindu. These activities lay outside the nationalist movement led by the Congress Party, but these fundamentalists too sought to define Hinduism as the basis of a national culture. This strain developed originally in reaction to Christian missionary activities, but eventually reproduced many of the features of Christianity itself. The militant Arya Samaj was founded in the late 19th century by Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883), an ascetic who preached throughout northern India. The Arya Samaj actually emerged

PLAYING THE HINDU CARD AT THE POLLS

Independent India's 10th national election, interrupted for three weeks by Rajiv Gandhi's assassination on May 21, took place against the backdrop of caste and religious unrest, rising inflation, incipient government bankruptcy, and regional revolts. But what may be most notable about this election is what did *not* happen.

For the second time in a row, the Congress Party—which has ruled India for all but four of its 44 years of independence—failed to win a majority in the 543-seat Parliament. Although Congress's P. V. Narasimha Rao has formed a new coalition government, it is doubtful that the 70-year-old Gandhi loyalist can lead it anywhere. Already, attention in India has shifted to the next election, not constitutionally required before 1996, but likely to be held much sooner. It is an election that the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stands a very good chance of winning.

The BJP was this year's real winner, replacing former prime minister V. P. Singh's Janata Dal as India's major opposition party. Formed in 1988 by an amalgamation of five anti-Congress parties, the Janata Dal appealed for social justice for India's "other backward castes," the so-called OBCs, which make up about 45 percent of the Hindu population (and do not include the Untouchables). As prime minister in 1990, Singh tried to impose hiring quotas that would have reserved 22 percent of the country's future job openings for OBCs. In the ensuing protests, nearly 100 upper-caste youths burned themselves to death in the streets. This year, the Janata Dal lost almost two-thirds of its places in parliament, retaining barely more than 50 seats.

The BJP, meanwhile, won 120 seats. In 1984, only two elections ago, it was a regional party supported by some Brahmans and Vaisha-Banyas (merchants and traders) in north-central India; it won only two seats.

The party's success is a testament to the strategy of its avuncular president, Lal Krishna Advani. The BJP maintains a united front, by marked contrast to the strife-ridden Congress and Janata Dal, while also seeming to distance itself from other, more fundamentalist Hindu groups. Its platform is strongly nationalist and pro-business; it includes a call to equip India's armed forces

with nuclear weapons. BJP campaigners evoke an India of restored greatness, an India unfettered by the "bogus secularism" espoused by Congress, which, in the BJP's view, invidiously favors minorities, especially Muslims. The BJP's promise of "equal treatment" for all Indian citizens has broad appeal; Rajiv Gandhi's acceptance of a separate civil code for Muslims in 1986 still sits badly with most Hindus.

There are several reasons to believe that the BJP may win next time. The declining professionalism of the military and the low morale of elite civil servants favor a cohesive party confident of its message. The party's clean image and serene public face go down well in a country where people are prone to equate governance with malfeasance. Its promise of an unshackled domestic economy is likely to gain favor as New Delhi's deficits and appallingly inefficient socialized business enterprises continue to drag down the economy. And of course there is always the "Hindu card" to play—for example, by fanning communal tensions through the Ayodhya temple dispute.

But the results of a BJP victory are not likely to be as apocalyptic as some detractors predict. Despite their implicitly anti-Muslim rhetoric, Advani and his colleagues are pragmatic men. Indeed, BJP *state* governments have maintained public peace far more effectively than their Congress predecessors did. India's foreign relations may also benefit. No crash program to build nuclear weapons is likely. And just as it took the anticommunist Richard Nixon to establish a Sino-American link, so may the BJP be able to smooth India's troubles with its Muslim neighbors. With its impeccable Hindu credentials, the BJP may be able to make concessions that other parties cannot consider. The same advantage could help the BJP resolve the secessionist crisis in the predominantly Muslim state of Kashmir.

A BJP victory is certainly not guaranteed. Yet the party's appeal will continue to grow if India's multiple problems do. And that is only too likely to happen.

—James Clad

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from its leaders' debates with missionaries in the bazaar pulpits of the Punjab. Its educational agenda and combative missionary spirit were evangelical in method, even though its message was strongly anti-Western. Thus it set up schools and introduced the novelty of the reconversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Dayanand believed that Hinduism, like Christianity and Islam, possessed central authoritative scriptures: the ancient Vedas. He believed in the pure theism expressed in the Vedas and rejected the so-called accretions of medieval Hinduism, such as child marriage and the proliferation of castes. In this way the Arya Samaj came, ironically, to define a new Hindu fundamentalism which was, in fact, completely alien to the history of the various groups in the Hindu melange.

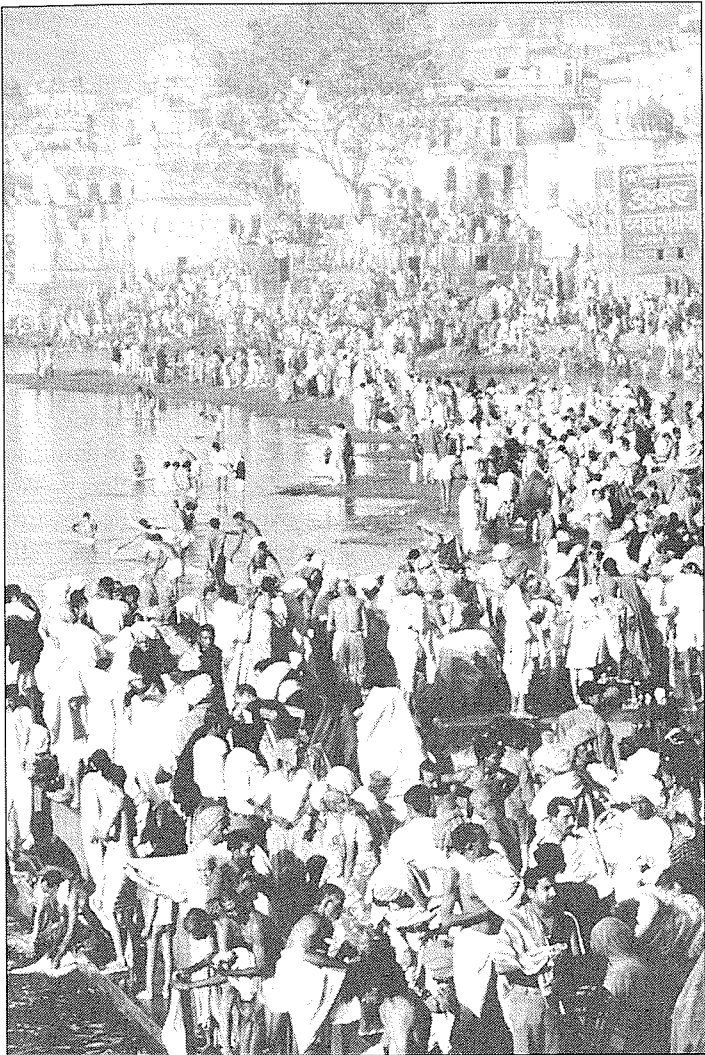
Today's Sikh secessionist movement in the Punjab cannot be understood without reference to the Hindu fundamentalism of the Arya Samaj. Sikhs rallied to the movement in 1984, after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered Indian troops to assault a band of Sikh militants holed up in the Sikh's holiest shrine in Amritsar. Gandhi was later assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, and 1,000 Sikhs were killed during Hindu riots that followed. Sectarian violence—kept alive by Sikh separatist guerrillas—has raged ever since. Last year, it cost more than 3,000 Indians their lives.

Yet until a century ago, Sikhism in the Punjab would have been considered just another religion within the Hindu melange. Sikhism was founded by a Hindu mystic and guru, Nanak (1469–1539), who taught a devotional approach to the divine (called *bhakti*) instead of the customary Brahman or sacrificial approach. The differences between Sikhs and Brahmans could be likened, loosely, to those between Protestants and Catholics. In numerous ways a Sikh distinguishes himself from a Brahman Hindu: The holy language of Hindus is San-

skrit, of Sikhs, Punjabi; Hindus worship many icons and statues of the gods, the Sikhs worship no images. Although Nanak had welcomed both Hindus and Muslims to his fellowship, the Muslim rulers in the Punjab certainly did not welcome Sikhs. In the long centuries of resisting persecution, the Sikhs became a militarized people, a "community of martial lions." (The most common Sikh surname, Singh, means "lion.") They set themselves apart physically by wearing the five *ks*: the long hair (*kesh*), the comb (*kanga*), the undergarment (*kachha*), the bracelet (*kara*) and the dagger (*kripan*). Politically, there was a Sikh kingdom after the overthrow of the Muslim rulers of northern India in the late 18th century. But theologically the Sikhs did not perceive themselves as radically different from other groups in the Hindu melange, and by the mid-19th century, the distinction between the Sikhs and other Hindus had begun to disintegrate. This was a time when, according to contemporary Sikh writer Khushwant Singh, Sikhs were "faced with the prospect of being reabsorbed into Hinduism and ceasing to exist as a separate community."

At first, Dayanand's reformed Hinduism appealed as much to the Sikhs as to the Hindus in the Punjab. But it did not take the Sikhs long to appreciate the uncompromising stance of the Arya Samaj's Hinduism. In their desire to rid Hinduism of its post-Vedic accretions, the Arya vilified all those who did not conform to its fundamentalist vision. Indeed, Dayanand was said to have denounced the first guru Nanak as a hypocrite. "The more the Samajists claimed Sikhism to be a branch of Hinduism," Singh writes, "the more the Sikhs insisted that they were a distinct and separate community." The polarization of Hindu versus Sikh thus originated a mere hundred years ago.

Ironically, the more vigorously that syn-



Sacred river: The life-giving Ganges is worshipped like a goddess, and its waters are used in a variety of Hindu religious ceremonies.

dicated Hinduism proclaims itself the sole inheritor of the indigenous Indian religion, the more it becomes denuded of any true Hindu religious values—such as tolerance and nonviolence. Hindu fundamentalists often turn to violent means to suppress Muslims, assertive Untouchables, and other minorities. Since independence, they have been involved in hundreds of communal riots costing thousands of lives throughout North India. It was a Hindu fundamentalist

who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 for trying to bring the Untouchables into the mainstream of Indian life.

Since syndicated Hinduism is less religion than politics, it is hardly surprising that one of its main architects, Veer Savarkar (1883–1966), was by no means a man of religious faith and at best an agnostic in private life. Indeed, for him, Hinduism as a religion was but a small part of what he called *hindutva*, or Hindu-ness, which he saw as the “racial” unity of all Hindus. In this sense, syndicated Hinduism does not differ from other dominant racial or ethnic groups that have achieved solidarity by persecuting minorities. Since the word Hinduism is in the West associated only with religion, Westerners tend to perceive “Hindu” conflicts in India as purely religious in nature but, significantly, Indian public opinion refers to them as “communal” conflicts.

Being political, syndicated Hinduism cannot find expression in everyday religious practices and even less in any theological principle. Rather, Hindu militants try to take control of the public spaces, the bazaars and streets, where people can be mobilized and the Islamic or Sikh enemy can be confronted. The process began around the turn of the century when nationalist leaders in western India, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, invented pan-Hindu religious ceremonies like the

Ganapati Utsav—the celebration of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. Songs written for these festivals urged Hindus to boycott the Muslim festival of Muharram, which they had once joined in celebrating. Since then, Hindu street festivities have been occurring with ever increasing frequency, their blaring loudspeakers and surging crowds announcing that Hindus command the public sphere.

What forces in Indian society sustain this syndicated Hinduism? After independence, as the democratic process brought the lower castes and other new social groups into the political fray, syndicated Hinduism provided them a sense of identity and a strategy for acquiring cultural respectability. At the same time, groups such as the upper-caste Marathas, who ruled their own state in western India during the 18th century and who now feel threatened by increasingly militant Untouchable groups, find it in their interest to nationalize their cause—to raise the flag of Hinduism in danger—to protect their own particular interests.

And with the Ayodhya temple affair, religious issues for the first time in the history of independent India threatened to overshadow secular ones in a national election. During the Ayodhya controversy, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People's Party)—often regarded as the parliamentary wing of Hindu organizations such as the VHP—experienced an enormous surge in popularity. The BJP, led by L. K. Advani, advocates both an aggressive foreign policy against India's Muslim neighbors and the repeal of affirmative action for religious minorities. After suffering major defeats in the past, the BJP emerged from the 1989 elections poised to be the single most powerful party in North and Central India where it already controls several state governments. Nationally the BJP

was strong enough by last November to bring down the coalition government of Prime Minister V. P. Singh, who had opposed building the Ayodhya temple, by withdrawing its support.

At the same time, however, the Ayodhya controversy shows the very thin basis for religious unity among the groups involved. There is a covert, and sometimes not so covert, contest for leadership of the Hindu side between the VHP, the wandering ascetic sects known as *sadhus*, and recently, the head monks of the Vedanta order. These groups have little in common save their hostility to Islam; they try to build unity by constantly referring to *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, a concept that didn't exist before the Independence movement. *Bharat Mata* is indeed a loaded term, for not only is *bharat* a Sanskrit word, but the rallying cry of "Mother India" reveals that, ultimately, these groups are appealing to politics, not to religion.

Indeed, religion has become so mixed up with politics that several of the established parties committed to secularism, such as the long-dominant Congress Party, are now also exploiting religious issue for political gain. It was during the rule of Indira Gandhi that the Congress Party first became involved with religious politics. In the early 1970s, she promoted, for instance, an obscure Sikh fundamentalist in the Punjab, Bhindranwale, in order to undermine the more moderate Sikh political opposition to her own party. Bhindranwale, who turned out to be a powerful charismatic figure, quickly seized the opportunity and came to lead a new Sikh fundamentalist movement, and that movement eventually took Indira Gandhi's very life. More recently, after its losses in the 1989 elections in the north to the BJP, the Congress Party began to reorient its image as a secular party, to remove the impression that it was going out of its way to please minorities.

The question of minorities is crucial. Syndicated Hinduism has alienated not only those who were never Hindu, such as Muslims and Christians, but also those at the margins of the melange: the Sikhs, the non-Brahmans in the south, and the Untouchables. Since independence, hundreds of thousands of Untouchables have converted to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Not only individuals but whole Untouchable communities find it easy to opt out of Hinduism precisely because there is now something called Hinduism.

Untouchable communities, which form over 20 percent of the population, now have something against which they can organize themselves. The most militant Untouchable group calls itself the Dalit Panther (or Oppressed Panthers—an obvious play on America's Black Panthers). Formed in the early 1970s by a group of Buddhist converts from the Untouchables—poets, writers, and public figures—the group launched a series of civil disobedience campaigns in western India. (Despite their name, they are not necessarily wedded to violence.) The Dalits' rejection of Hinduism and their conversion to Buddhism clearly show how the element in the Hindu melange, Brahmanism, has become identified with Hinduism as a whole, and therefore, why groups like the Dalits reject it.

Religious strife in modern India is scarcely the responsibility of national Hinduism alone. The British colonizers intentionally polarized the country along religious and communal lines during the first half of the 20th century. As part of their "divide and rule" policy, the British encouraged Muslims, lower castes, and other minorities to develop their communal identity by granting them separate elections for the

local councils. But these minority communities have, since independence, hardened their stance against majoritarian religious domination. In response to their defiant stance, syndicated Hinduism becomes even more intransigent, and so it goes in a vicious cycle. The gains of the BJP in the 1991 election, the signs of a turn in Congress politics, and the portrayal of local conflicts as battles between Hindus and non-Hindus all show with dismaying clarity how thoroughly India's political process is now dominated by religion.

As syndicated Hinduism captures political power in India, we can expect more dire consequences for the various minorities than the early "secular nationalists" like Gandhi or Nehru could ever have imagined. Indeed, we need to reconsider the meaning of modern secularism. If the distinction between the secular and the religious is arbitrary, and if Western societies have learned to respect that distinction only after the gradual waning of religious influence, then in India, where religion is alive and growing, secularization will appear an uncomfortable import. The modern secularism of the enlightened Indian intelligentsia may have always been misplaced. Maybe Indians are recovering the language they feel most comfortable with—the language of religious ties and identity. This is certainly what we have seen throughout Indian history: Politics and society have been inseparable from religion. If this is so, India's Hindu majority will have to relearn the most important lesson of its past: how to live as Hindus with a plurality of traditions, not only with Muslims and other minorities, but also with the variety within.