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Hindu Nationalism, Indian Democracy

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India's post-independence generation of leaders sought to keep religion at arm's length from politics, regarding religion as a disruptive force. It was, after all, conflict between Hindus and Muslims that had led to massive violence and to the partition of India. These leaders wanted India-unlike Pakistan whose leaders declared their country to be an Islamic state-to be a secular state in which all religions were to be given equal place.

India's leaders also interpreted Hinduism as a benign, even positive, force for democratic development. Hinduism, they pointed out, is an inclusive, not an exclusive religion. Unlike Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, it has no conception of theological orthodoxy, no single text to which all Hindus subscribe, no single deity whom all must worship, no universally prescribed rituals whose observance marks one as a believer, and no single ethical code of conduct. Hinduism is a religion whose core is mythology, not theology. For Hindus there are no such categories as heretics and apostates. Hinduism, said Nehru, is a tolerant religion, eclectic, open to ideas from other faiths, attuned therefore to the requirements of a democratic polity in which conflicts over interests and values are resolved through negotiations and compromise by people who are tolerant of one another.

There is, to be sure, another possible view of Hinduism. Hindu society is based upon a caste system in which each social group must perform its own dharma, or duty. Thus the Hindu state expects citizens to discharge their obligations according to the dharma of their caste. The state is an expression of the social order of hierarchy, and an instrument for maintaining that order. The king is part of the sacred order and it is his dharma to protect and preserve that order. Since the structure order is based on division and hierarchy, benefits and punishments should be dispensed unequally to individuals by virtue of the orders to which they belong. And since the divine purpose can only be fulfilled if each individual performs his appointed functions, it follows that there are no natural rights irrespective of the social status of the individual. Indians, according to this view, have rights or are punished as is appropriate to the community to which they belong. According to classical legal texts, Brahmins are to be given a lighter punishment than members of other castes for the same offenses, and indeed, what is a crime for one caste need not be criminal for another.

To argue about which of these interpretations is the correct one is to commit the fallacy of essentialism. For in understanding the impact of a religion on politics, what matters is which interpretation of the religion is widely held. India's post-independence leaders argued not only that Hinduism is a tolerant religion, but also that Hinduism is not as inequalitarian in theory as it is in practice. Caste, Hindu social reformers argued, is a medieval perversion of the system described in the Vedic texts. These spoke of social orders with some mobility, not unlike Europe's estates, rather than the rigid hierarchy that had in fact come to characterize Indian social life.

It is important to note that for Nehru and many others who subscribed to these views there was little if any pride in Hinduism as a religion. Nehru himself decried what he regarded as the anti-scientific superstitious ideas of many Hindus. He could not abide astrologers, saddhus, or priests. Hindu holidays and festivals were for him cultural, not religious, events. He worshipped at no household shrines and did not attend temples. And even as he praised the tolerance of Hinduism, he noted that Indians were also tolerant of unspeakable inequalities and brutalities.

Whatever role Hinduism may or may not have played in the development of Indian democracy, it is fair to say that India has a democratic polity with a reasonably good record on human rights. India has a free press, freedom of assembly and of religion, and free elections that have enabled opposition parties to change the government. This is not to say that the Indian government has never suspended civil rights. It did so during the emergency of 1975 to 1977, but these rights were subsequently restored. No doubt Amnesty International has a file on India, but I daresay that it is probably smaller than that of most other countries-or if it is larger it is because Indian representatives of Amnesty International are freely able to send in reports.

At a minimum one can assert that Hinduism has not been an impediment to the development of democratic institutions and civil liberties. India has a hierarchical social order, but not a hierarchical church. Unlike the historically conservative role played by the Catholic hierarchy in Latin America, or the role now played by Islamic fundamentalists, Hindu priests have been politically passive. Nor has the priesthood held up religious values as a standard for social policies such as birth control or abortion.

There are, however, two ways in which Hinduism, as interpreted by India's political leaders, has shaped the development of Indian democracy. The first is with respect to the notion of group rights.

The Indian constitution (in a section entitled Right to Equality) reveals a tension between Western and Hindu notions of rights. The constitution says that "the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth" and that "there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment under the State." But the constitution also adds that "nothing shall prevent parliament from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the scheduled castes [ex-untouchables] and scheduled tribes, including reservations of appointments in government." In the interests of achieving equality of outcome, government can provide unequal opportunities to groups. The state can provide quotas in employment to ex-untouchables. It can prevent non-tribals from purchasing tribal lands. It can extend educational and employment benefits to other backward castes.

Thus, after reconfirming the nineteenth-century Western liberal conception of the rights of citizens, the Indian constitution then asserts the principle of collective rights of classes of citizens based upon caste when these claims are made on behalf of groups that are socially and educationally backward. Other provisions of the constitution in fact go beyond enabling the government to give preferences to specified classes of citizens by requiring the government to do so. The constitution, for example, provides for reservations of appointments of scheduled castes and tribes to the administrative services and for reservations in parliament and in state assemblies.

In short, the Hindu notion of rights as privileges has been converted to the notion of rights as entitlements. The goals are different, of course-not to maintain inequalities but to achieve equality of outcomes. Entitlements are to be given to individuals not because of their own social and economic condition but rather because of the low status and unsatisfactory condition of the community to which they belong and into which they were born. In early 1991 the government announced that preferences in government employment would be extended to those who belonged to the "backward castes," a loosely defined group of castes who claimed to be economically depressed, and whose members constituted a majority of the Indian population.

The second way in which elite interpretations of Hinduism have shaped public policy is in their attitudes toward other religions. The government has passed laws against religious proselytizing since it regards conversion from Hinduism as an attack on national identity. Each religious community, however, is permitted to follow its traditional personal laws with respect to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property rights. The government reaffirmed this policy after a bench of five Supreme Court judges ruled that a divorced Muslim woman named Shah Bano was entitled to maintenance from her husband in accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code, though according to Shariat the man's only obligation was to repay the marriage settlement from her family. In 1986 parliament, pressed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, passed the Muslim Women Act which overruled the Supreme Court to provide that a divorced Muslim wife had the right of support from her own family, not from her husband. The government had rejected the principle that a common law should apply to all of India's citizens.

In the late 1980s two political movements that explicitly exalted Hinduism, the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won increasing popular support. The VHP, a new organization with strong support form the Hindu urban middle class, launched a campaign to have the Babri Mosque in the north Indian city of Ayodhya, built in the sixteenth century on the presumed birth site of Lord Rama, demolished and replaced by a Hindu shrine. The BJP, one of India's well-established political parties, attacked the government for its concessions to Muslims on personal law and what it regarded as a "soft" policy toward Muslim-majority Kashmir. More importantly, the BJP launched a campaign for "Hindutva," or Hindu nationalism, asserting that India is a country with a single national identity, not multiple identities. The BJP argued that the government had been "pandering" to its Muslim and Sikh minorities and that it was time to assert a national identity centering on Hindu culture. The more militant among the Hindu nationalists called upon Muslims to adopt Hindu names, observe Hindu holidays, accept Hindu historical figures as their own, and in other ways to accept the dominance of Hindu culture.

BJP leaders were also critical of the government's decision to grant reservations to the backward castes, a policy that had angered India's educated (and largely upper caste) classes. The government's policy, they said, was dividing Hindu society.

Hindu nationalists brought forth a new interpretation of Hinduism. They centered their conception of Hinduism on Lord Rama, a Hindu deity who is the central figure in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana. The Ramayana was itself popularized (and modernized) in an extraordinarily successful national television series. The VHP launched a national campaign to consecrate sacred bricks for the building of a temple to Lord Rama where the Babri Mosque now stands. L. K. Advani, the head of the BJP, led a procession across northern India to support the movement. Hindu nationalism had become a major force in Indian politics, a backlash against the Nehruite conception of Hinduism and secularism, against reservations for backward castes, and for a new definition of national identity based upon an acceptance of India as a Hindu society.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has taken part in every national parliamentary election since the first election of 1952, but not until the parliamentary elections of 1991 had it offered such a clear exposition of Hindu nationalism. Before 1991, its share of the national vote ranged from 7 percent to a high of 11 percent (in 1989). In 1991 its vote leaped to 23 percent, with most of its support in the Hindi-speaking states of northern India where Muslims are concentrated. The BJP is now India's second-largest party, with 119 parliamentary seats (up from 86 in the 1989 elections) against 225 for Congress, and it controls four state governments. Its electoral base is strongest in urban areas, among younger voters, and among the upper castes, not among the traditionally religious peasantry, suggesting that its appeal may grow as the country becomes more urban, educated, and exposed to the mass media.

Does Hindu nationalism threaten Indian democracy? Nehruite secularists, parties of the left, and of course India's Muslims fear that it will. If the growth of the BJP leads to a rise in Hindu-Muslim violence and growing conflicts between India's upper and lower castes, they will be right.

But it need not. Hindu nationalism is not religious fundamentalism. Its leaders are politicians, not priests. They are not seeking to reestablish the caste hierarchy, or to persecute religious minorities. Their election manifesto calls for deregulation of the economy and more market-oriented policies. And they are committed to the democratic electoral process.

But religious nationalism, whether in Ireland, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, or prewar Japan, has often had two faces, one that nurtures pride in the nation's cultural and historical achievements and that can be a force for positive national goals, and one that is destructive of minorities and becomes a force for external expansion and aggression. Hindu nationalists are themselves divided, the more militant among them taking an aggressive anti-Muslim stance, the moderates seeking to create a positive nationalism without threatening minorities. The outcome of this conflict among Hindu nationalists will not only shape the character of the movement, but will have profound consequences for the functioning of Indian democracy.

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