

A Caste of THOUSANDS

Rajiv Gandhi's assassination marks the end of an epoch in Indian politics. The postwar creed of secular liberalism is threatened by the rise of communalism and caste warfare. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the conflict goes to the heart of conceptions of ethnicity in modern political culture.

India will soon have been through another round of general elections proving that, even if its economy is not so well at the moment, its democracy remains functional. However, the elections have been marked by a bout of violence and aggression, culminating in the death of prime ministerial aspirant Rajiv Gandhi in May. The basis for this violence has been the conflict between Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Backward and Scheduled castes—all those multiple identities that one associates with India and that have recently given rise to passionate conflicts in the country. It is these conflicts and their history, particularly those around issues of Hinduism and caste that I want to focus on as a key to the spectacular instability which has thrust Indian politics into its recent turmoil.

The decision last year of V P Singh's coalition government to reserve about 50% of jobs in the public sector for the

lower castes, who comprise 85% of the population, led to a series of tragic suicides by upper caste youths in many Indian cities and, eventually, to the downfall of the government. Then came a climactic point in the agitation, festering since 1984, by some Hindu organisations and political parties to rebuild a temple at the holy city of Ayodhya in north India, a temple that they claim was demolished and converted into a mosque by the Muslim emperor Babar in 1528. This temple movement has now become part of an attempt to build up a strong, aggressive and militant sense of unity and self-respect among the Hindus. The people who feel most threatened by this development are the Muslims of the subcontinent. The coming years in India will see people discuss the question of identity with strong and divisive passions. As an Indian character in *The Satanic Verses* says (and I imagine here the Indian shaking of the head and a heavy upper-class Delhi accent): "Battle lines are being drawn in India today, secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on."

There are serious problems, as we shall see, with the way Rushdie's character frames this question of choice. For what we see in India is nothing short of contemporary ethnic intolerance or what, in popular parlance, we often



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call racism. There are, of course, particular Indian twists to this story, and it is also true that racism, properly speaking, has social-darwinist connotations and should not be conflated with ethnicity. Yet, for my purpose here, the popular word racism has the advantage of not making India look peculiar. The possibility that the current Indian Hindu-Muslim or upper versus lower caste conflicts may be, in a significant sense, versions of modern problems of ethnicity or race, is seldom entertained in discussions in the Western media, both Hinduism and caste being seen, not altogether unreasonably, as particular to the subcontinent. Within India, too, the same law of oversight rules, for racism is thought of as something the white people do to the coloured. What Indians do to one another is variously described as communalism, regionalism and casteism, but never racism. Yet the similarities between what goes under the name of communalism or regionalism in India and what is loosely called racism elsewhere are remarkable.

In focusing on the theme of ethnic intolerance, I will argue that the experiment of nation-making in India has a significance that goes far beyond the boundaries of that country. For it is a story which tells us how modern problems of ethnicity cannot be separated from modern means of government and communication. My emphasis,

in other words, will be on the way the development of a modern public-political life in India has called into being constructions of both Hinduism and caste that do not admit of such simple binary distinctions as Salman Rushdie's character invokes: secular/religious, liberal/fundamentalist, nationalist/communal.

This is not to deny the evidence that exists of religious conflicts in India before the Europeans came to the country. But something has fundamentally changed about both Hinduism and caste since British rule and particularly since the beginning of the 20th century. If I may put it simply by using the example of caste, the change may be crudely described as this. Earlier, one probably had two kinds of castes. You were one caste when you got married, and there was always the question of what caste your neighbours thought you were. But now you also have to think what caste you are when you apply for a job or when you run for a seat in parliament. And your answer to these three questions will often not be the same. In other words, caste and religion now feature prominently in Indian public life. The concepts and institutions that make up the public sphere—free press, voluntary associations, avenues for free debate and inquiry in the public interest—are modern Europeans' intellectual gifts to the people they

considered less fortunate than themselves and at whose doors they arrived as raging, mad imperialists. My point is that modern problems of Hinduism and caste are inseparable from the history of this modern public life in India that the British instituted and the nationalists preserved in what they thought were the best interests of the country.

British rule in India lasted a little short of two hundred years. The most far-reaching and fundamental innovation that the British introduced to Indian society, in my view, was the modern state. One symptom of its modernity was that its techniques of government were very closely tied to techniques of measurement. From surveys of land and crop output to prospecting for minerals, from measuring Indian brains (on behalf of the false science of phrenology) to measuring Indian bodies, diets and life-expectancies (the foundations of physical anthropology and modern medicine were laid in India), the British had the length and breadth of India, her history, culture and society mapped, classified and quantified in detail that was nothing if not precise even when it was wrongheaded.

The most dramatic examples of this governmental concern with measurement were the decennial Indian censuses, the first of which was published in 1872. Since the British did not go to India in search of pure knowledge, all these studies were produced in the cause and in the process of governing India, and it is this pervasive evidence of marriage between government and measurement that I take as something that belongs to the deep structure of the imagination that is invested in modern political orders. Without numbers, it would be impossible to practise bureaucratic or instrumental rationality.

It is not that premodern governments had no use for numbers (one only has to recall that the word 'census' is of Roman origin). But as the history of the discipline of statistics tells us, systematic "collection, classification, and discussion of facts bearing on the condition of a state or community" (to quote *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*) is something that only modern governments do. Such measurements, one could argue, were central to their idea and practice of distributive justice whether in the sphere of political representation or that of the economy.

The British, as the representatives and the inheritors of European Enlightenment, brought these ideas to India. While the British would never take the step (until 1947) of granting India full self-government, they were often concerned about being 'fair' to the different competing sections that, in their view, made up Indian society. And these sections the British had defined quite early on in religious and caste terms. Categories based on caste and religion dominated the censuses that the British undertook in India. At every census, people were asked to state their religion and caste. This was in marked contrast to what the British did at home where religion was never an important category in the British censuses for the period 1801 to 1931. Counting Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Untouchables, however, became a critical political exercise particularly in the 20th century as the British began to include Indian representatives in the legislative bodies in very measured

doses. What made the census operations critical was that the British, in trying to be fair referees, made the process of political representation 'communal': seats in the legislative assemblies were earmarked for different 'communities' (defined by religious/caste categories) in proportion to their share of property and population.

Nationalists like Nehru and Gandhi abhorred this process and the ideology that governed it, 'communalism'—a word that still leads a stigmatised existence in India and works as a surrogate for 'racism'. Political leaders of the Muslims and the Untouchables, on the other hand, felt much happier going along with the British-devised arrangements until the final decade before Independence when negotiations between Indian leaders became as important as those between them and the British. Of particular importance in the Indian story is the category 'Scheduled caste', which the British created (and the government of India has retained) in 1936 and which was so called because it referred to a schedule of castes officially recognised as disadvantaged. Being on this list made these castes eligible for special treatment in respect of political representation under the Government of India Act of 1935. Other kinds of affirmative action were to be undertaken in favour of these groups in the future.

Observers of modern India agree that these processes created new definitions of collective identities in the public and political spheres. In their everyday lives, in the sphere of what we would now call the personal, Indians, like human beings everywhere, live with senses of identity that are highly situational. Yet the very existence of administrative categories of ethnicity—whether one is looking at the inter-national level or at developments within a country—creates a public sphere for 'ethnicity' (a 'national' identity being its highest form). It is, of course, within this sphere that the identity of being Indian or Hindu or Muslim or Scheduled caste takes on a new political meaning which resides alongside, and interlaced with, the more everyday sense of community.

The censuses and other similar reports then reconstituted the meaning of 'community' or 'ethnicity' and gave Indians three important political messages, all of which are entirely commensurate with the idea of liberal political democracy. These messages were:

- * that communities could be enumerated and in numbers lay one's political clout
- * that the social and economic progress of a community was a measurable entity, measured in the case of Indian censuses by their share in public life (education, professions, employment and so on), and
- * that this enabled governments and communities to devise objective tests for the relative 'backwardness' or otherwise of a community.

Indians were quick to learn the art of participation in this public sphere. They learnt—as we all do when we want to take advantage of equal opportunity legislation—that modern governments have rather limited intelligence; that



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their principles of distributive justice require simple, homogeneous, all or none identities, the kinds that passports bear. When we look back now at India in the 1870s and 1880s, it becomes clear that the era of modern, competitive, governmentally defined ethnic identities familiar to us in liberal democracies, had already arrived.

The peculiarity of colonial Indian history lay in the fact that these identities were based on religious categories because of, as I have said, a certain degree of reification of these categories by the British. By the 1890s, Hindu and Muslim leaders were quoting census figures at each other to prove whether or not they had received their legitimate share of benefits from British rule (such as employment and education). The rise of modern caste consciousness shows a similar concern for the measurement of 'progress' in public life. The famous anti-Brahman 'manifesto', produced in Madras in 1916 by the non-Brahman castes who formed a new political party, owed its rhetorical force to social categories and statistics the government had used in its internal deliberations. Demography was now pressed into the service of such newly-redefined ethnic jealousies and competition.

But if India was simply a place where ethnicity was contained within the liberal structure of competitive pluralism, it would not have made news and this article

would not have been needed, as our contemporary Australian experience of ethnicity would have been quite adequate as a guide to understanding Indian developments. Ethnic strife in India, however, has spilled blood in large amounts at different points in her history from the 1890s onward. Recent problems in Assam, Punjab, and Kashmir have been particularly glaring. What then is the difference, say, between our experience of ethnicity here in the 1980s and 90s, and what is happening in India?

The important difference, it seems to me, is largely this. Modern ethnic consciousnesses in India have been fashioned under historical circumstances where people have been under intense pressure to pursue and emphasise their differences from one another. The important point is that the question of Indian political unity has never been settled beyond all doubt and disputation. The British cobbled a political India together for reasons of administrative convenience. The nationality question was muddled from the beginning. In the public sphere that the British created, there was no one, universally agreed-upon 'Indian' ethnicity. The struggle to produce a sense of cultural unity against the British made mainstream Indian nationalism culturally Hindu. The Muslim search for Pakistan emphasised Islam. The lower castes' struggle for justice produced anti-Brahmanism.

The last 15 or 20 years have seen an explosive combination of democracy and demography. The population of India has almost trebled since Independence. The growth and diversity of the middle class may be judged from the fact that while at Independence there was consensus that the number of important languages was 14, there are now daily newspapers published in more than 78 different languages. This middle class has tasted consumerism which has increased the sense of competition in urban life. The secessionist aspirations in Kashmir, Punjab and parts of Assam have gained in strength in recent years. Caste, particularly the Indian policy of positive discrimination in favour of the lower castes, has become an extremely contentious issue in public life (in the context of both a sluggish economy and an ever-widening awareness of their 'legal rights' on the part of the lower castes). And lately there has been the movement, led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (a modern Hindu political organisation), for the restoration of the temple on the place where the legendary god-king Rama was supposed to have been born, the Ramjanmabhumi. This agitation which aims to convert Hinduism into a strong, monolithic and militant religion has given many Indian Muslims understandable nightmares.

Fundamentally, like the Soviet Union, India remains in part an imperial structure held together by strong tendencies towards centralism. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, these centralist tendencies exist within, and have to work through, a democratic political structure. Indians have an investment in democracy which was proved in the unpopularity of Mrs Gandhi's two-year emergency of 1975-77. Indian democracy thus holds together a system that can survive as a unity only if it has a strong centralising and unifying ideology as well. And this is where there have been some very significant changes.

Once this centralising tendency was most powerfully represented by the ideology of Jawaharlal Nehru and stood for some kind of consensus among the political elite. This ideology, known in India by the name of secularism, drew heavily on the Western liberal heritage to argue for a separation of religion and public life. This tenet never described the actual culture of political practice in India where a religious idiom and imagination had always been very strongly present. But so long as the national leadership lay in the hands of a tiny elite reared in and respectful of the British traditions of politics, the everyday religiousness of Indian political culture could be kept separate from the decision-making elite at the highest levels of the government. The custodian nature of this elite was reflected in the unity of the Congress party where Nehru always remained a Bonapartist figure.

The combination of demography, democracy and economic growth in India has now ensured that the political elite is no longer tiny. There are no Bonapartist figures in India today. Nehruvian secularism, a close cousin of Western liberalism represented now by marxists and the left-liberals in India, is on the defensive (recall Salman Rushdie's character talking about the battle lines), and for some very profound reasons.

Liberal political structures and institutions in the West are supported by certain tenets of individualism that pervade both private and public spheres of life. Most Indians grow up in entirely different family and social structures and while they are perfectly comfortable with the idea of Western-style technology and creature comforts, the prospect of adopting post-industrial family relationships does not gladden their hearts. Students of political sociology have demonstrated time and again that the cultural dynamics of Indian institutions are quite different from those that one might find in the West. The sophistication of Indian culture lies in very different directions.

This is where I locate the current conundrum of Indian political culture. On the one hand there exists a structure of pluralist and democratic political representation which, as history has shown, is valued by the Indian ruling classes. On the other hand, a centralising tendency constantly asserts itself on the political scene precisely because the question of Indian unity has not yet been settled. The political geography of India keeps evolving. This is the context in which the new political Hinduism has assumed importance. What gives the Hinduists' message urgency now is the freedom movement among the Muslims in Kashmir. The avowedly Hindu parties make hatred of Muslims the focus of Hindu/Indian unity.

What are the prospects and problems of this new attempt to define Indianness with a conscious Hindu content?

First of all, its strengths. A most important source of strength of this movement is its capacity to speak with many different voices. Its leaders at the parliamentary level sometimes speak the prose of pure liberalism. We are all equally Indians, they say, then why should the Muslims receive any special treatment as a constitutionally-recognised 'minority community'? At the grassroots level, how-

ever, the mobilisation of support is achieved by preaching hatred toward the Muslims. The internally diversified rhetoric of this movement points to the many different constituencies that it is seeking to capture.

Its weakness lies in the fact that Hinduism does not lend itself very easily to the manufacture of a monolithic version of it. The Hinduism that the Hindu parties try to project have so far reflected a predominantly upper-caste, Brahmanical imagination. It is difficult to see how the lower caste people could welcome this Hinduism or wholeheartedly identify with it. Pushing the cause of the so-called scheduled and backward castes, however, could cost this movement the support of the upper-castes on which it has until now depended. This may in part explain why the movement is mainly confined to certain regions of north India; the ruling Hinduism of south India has for long been anti-Brahmanical. As far as I can see, the neo-Hindus have not yet succeeded in bridging this caste divide.

One ironical aspect of this movement derives from the global context in which this attempt develop 'one Hinduism' is being made. The Indian diaspora to the developed countries—the highly skilled professional Indians who have always constituted a large part of the international market in 'brains' since World War Two—has increasingly become an important source of financial and moral support for this neo-Hindu, semi-fascist movement in India. The irony is that an important section of this emigré community—the Indians who now live in the United States—successfully lobbied in the recent past to get themselves classified as a special ethnic community in order to qualify better for the benefits that flow from the American equal opportunity legislation. Yet the question of giving 'minority' communities back home some of the same privileges seems to cause a lot of political heartburn among their leaders in India.

India is no doubt at an interesting point in her history. It is unlikely that monolithic Hinduism will emerge victorious through the democratic process, though its pull will remain an important factor. Nor is there any evidence that economic growth by itself will necessarily revive and spread the spirit of Nehruvian secularism. Some Indian intellectuals wistfully look to the memory of Gandhi in search of a non-modern/non-Western model of political order. But Gandhi in some respects was a very special case made possible by the operation of colonialism. Most powerful Indians, as an American journalist once said, find Gandhi 'inspiring and irrelevant'. International developments, on the other hand, particularly those in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, must affect the way the nationality question will be discussed in India in the coming few years. Can there be a recognisably Indian variety of ethnic or religious tolerance in the public sphere now that is, at the same time, in harmony with other institutions in the country? The future will tell but that question defines for me the challenge of the historical juncture at which India now finds herself.

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