

Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India

It is widely agreed that the spectre of growing communalism is the most important issue facing India today. In the battle for the soul of Indian nationalism three positions have been staked out. Firstly, there are those who insist that Indian nationalism must rest on cultural and psychological foundations of an impeccably Hindu provenance, though the ecumenical character of Hinduism licenses pragmatic shifts in interpretation so as to deflect charges of communalism. Secondly, there are those who insist that Indian nationalism must derive from secular principles. Notwithstanding the enduring problems of precise definition, the term 'secular' does possess an agreed core meaning: state neutrality with regard to religion. In a multireligious society like that of India, this can mean either a fundamental separation of the state from religious activity and affiliation, or state impartiality on all issues relating to the religious interests of different communities. In practice, 'Indian secularism' has been a mixture of the two: an unsatisfactory attempt to reconcile what some consider to be essentially incompatible approaches.

The third position has, to date, had a narrower field of operation, confined for the most part to academic rather than activist or popular debate. Nevertheless, it has been claiming an increasing number of adherents. It holds that because secularism is in origin a profoundly Western, or at least unIndian, concept, it is intrinsically at odds with the reality of non-Western/non-Christian existence in general, and with Indian genius in particular. What is thus called for is not secularism, nor Hindu nationalism, but an anti-secularism which opposes factitious attempts at separating religion from politics and instead encourages the use of the 'authentic' resources of faith to create a sociopolitical culture with a more deep-rooted and genuine tolerance of diversity and pluralism than 'Western secularism' can ever generate. Religion itself is to be the key resource in the struggle against communalism. State-centred theories of how to engineer the social good (the modern secular state) are themselves the problem, the stimulus behind communalism; to these must be counterposed the resources of a religiously suffused and religiously plural civil society. Here Indian anti-secularism can to some extent join forces with post-modernist celebrations of difference, diversity and pluralism, likewise located in civil society and threatened by the technocratic state.

These competing claims provide the context for the following reflections on communalism and nationalism, and their putative common ground. In order to fight communalism we must be certain that we understand what it is and how it grows. To fight it in the name of a secular nationalism requires us to understand nationalism as well, to know exactly what it shares and does not share with communalism. Some attempts at definition are therefore clearly in order.

The Pattern of Modern Nationalisms

There is a consensus of opinion that nationalism is a modern phenomenon attendant upon the emergence of capitalism, though its longevity has undoubtedly surprised those who thought the globalizing tendencies of late capitalism would render nationalism increasingly anachronistic in the post-1945 period. But what are 'nationalism', 'the nation', 'nationality'? Up to 1945, nation formation and the emergence of nation-states has mostly taken place in four kinds of ways. There was first what Benedict Anderson has called creole or settler nationalism of the New World, where language was not the *differentia specifica* of nationhood and nation-state formation.¹ Then came the linguistic-based territorial nationalisms of western and eastern Europe. In the case of the latter, national yearnings were intimately related to the dissolution of the Hapsburg, Ottoman and Tsarist multinational empires. Then came the tide of anti-colonial nationalisms of this century, whose boundaries of resistance coincided in almost all cases with the seemingly artificial border demarcations of colonial administrative convenience. In these 'new' nations, nationhood and nation-state formation were much more clearly connected to the existence of self-conscious national movements intent on expressing a distinct national culture and history which could not

¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London 1983.

always, or even often, be congruent with the spread of some single indigenous language or ethnic group. In the postwar period, not only have we seen the resurgence of the supposedly resolved 'older' nationalisms and the prolongation of the phase of anti-colonial liberation struggles, but also the emergence of post-colonial nationalisms whose *raison d'être* are new and distinct and cannot be simply ascribed to the distorting legacies of colonial rule. Such is particularly the case with South Asia—for example, Bangladesh, the national movements in Pakistan, Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, and the secessionist struggles in India's northeast, in Punjab and in Kashmir.

There is an important lesson here: there is no single feature or identifiable factor common to all nationalisms, to all nations, to all nation-state formations. Though many cultural characteristics occur in different nationalisms, they never combine in any fixed or immutable package of 'national markers'. Furthermore, no single characteristic is ever indispensable. Nations (and nationalisms) are *not* intrinsically secular categories. For good or ill they can rest on exclusivist racial, tribal or religious claims. Indeed, in India religious groups have been among the strongest candidates for nationhood—as testified to by secessionist struggles in Kashmir and Punjab and in the fact of Partition itself.

The early stirrings of Indian nationalism, whether as political movement, national identity or national ideology, owed not a little to the 'Hindu Renaissance' of the nineteenth century. Hindu nationalism was important in the promotion of an Indian national identity, though it was not the only factor in this regard and was itself contested by wider-ranging interpretations of Indian culture and history. There is, in short, always a cultural struggle involved in the creation of a nation or nationality, which is best understood either as Anderson has defined it—an imagined political community—or better still as Kohn understood it: as a cultural entity, lodged above all in consciousness, striving to become a political fact.² This cultural struggle is sharper in the case of the 'new' nations of the twentieth century. Here nation-formation is more directly tied to the existence and growth of a national movement intent on fostering a national identity based on indigenous cultural roots. It is precisely this latter capacity that has given nationalism the edge over socialism. It largely explains why successful socialist revolutions have taken root by way of a nationalism either anti-colonial or anti-imperialist in thrust (Japanese imperialism in the case of China, Yankee imperialism in the case of Cuba and Nicaragua).

The purpose of this brief excursus into the nature of the newer nationalisms in general and into Indian nationalism in particular is to establish on *prima facie* grounds the plausibility of the following proposition: that the period when an anti-colonial national identity was being forged was also the period when the Indian polity was being communalized, and that the Congress-led National Movement cannot escape most of the responsibility for this. Though there is no space to

² H. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, New York 1944.

develop this argument in full, the conclusion stands in direct opposition to those currents of Indian historiography that insist on the essentially anti-communal character of the Indian National Movement.

Here Gandhi's role comes into dispute. How central were his use of religious idiom and his personal 'saintliness' to the generation that produced a mass following for the Congress? Was his religiosity peripheral or central to the forming of a winning political strategy for Independence—a Gramscian 'war of movement' hingeing on an escalating series of compromises? Was it the source of a mere communal fringe? Or did he speak the 'language of the masses' with a force that no one else could come close to approximating?

Gandhi did not so much speak the language of the masses as speak *in* the language of the masses, which was and is saturated by religious discourse. The distinction is fundamental. Gandhi did, then, help to create a very important 'Congress link' between local-level grievances and the pan-Indian struggle against the centralized colonial state. But it was a link over which he did not exercise that much control. Historians of the subaltern have pointed out the frequent discrepancies between what Gandhi espoused and the way his exhortations or directives were actually interpreted to fit popular perceptions of the meaning of their struggles.³ Since the socially oppressed of India are no more naturally prone to permanent non-violence towards, and class conciliationism with, their social oppressors than the socially oppressed elsewhere, Gandhian principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and trusteeship (class paternalism) were in part forged precisely to serve as control mechanisms over this link.

The link also provided for a two-way interpenetration of identities. Most historical work has stressed one direction—the seeping downwards of a 'national identity' so that obscure villages and unknown villagers could come to identify themselves with the National Movement as Indians as well as retaining their other more primordial and spatially restricted identities. Sandra Freitag has been one of the few who have emphasized the opposite process: the manner in which local-level identities became more generalized and spread upwards to influence even the character of the National Movement.⁴ In the north, contrasted to the west and south (where linguistic and anti-Brahmin caste identity was rather more important), the dominant community identity was often religious in character. Here the development and expansion of a common religious identity was not the passive product of colonial machinations but was imbricated in local cultural and political practices, themselves undergoing change in a dynamic socioeconomic and political context. Even before the advent of Gandhi, Congress efforts to widen its local-support base in the north meant building on existing cultural cleavages and perceptions and thus promoting the consolidation of communal identities. That

³ R. Guha and G. Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York 1988. See especially in this volume G. Pandey, 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism'; and S. Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma'.

⁴ S. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, Oxford 1989.

the Congress-led National Movement did have an important secular dimension tied to leadership aspirations is not in dispute. But the growing weight of historical evidence would strongly suggest that any easy separation of nationalism and communalism in the period between British colonial consolidation and Independence is frankly untenable.

Communalism

If the characterization of nationalism as a modern phenomenon is relatively unproblematic, the same cannot be said of communalism. Nevertheless, it is best understood in this way and thus as qualitatively different from the politico-religious tensions and conflicts of pre-modern/pre-capitalist/pre-colonial times. The idea that the separation of the political and religious is a viable proposition had to await the emergence of generalized market relations (generalized commodity production) that for the first time enabled a decisive separation of the political and economic spheres of existence. An autonomous civil society then emerged. The idea of a political life and of whole areas of social existence that are relatively autonomous of each other marks a point of decisive transition, providing for the first time the foundation for the *relative* decline and compartmentalization of metaphysical and religious thought. The private world of 'meaning' and the public arena of 'legitimacy' were substantially separated. Secularism is itself a modern phenomenon and brings with it, again for the first time, the notion that the separation of the political and religious is a positive ideal.

It is because of this pre-established point of reference—that is, the secular ideal—that communalism has a distinctly negative connotation, itself testimony to its more modern character. Communalism may not be straightforwardly counterposed to nationalism. But it is more easily contrasted with secularism. There is another more important reason for emphasizing the modernity of communalism. In the era of modern mass politics, religious-based or influenced politics has a power and strength that is qualitatively greater and more dangerous than any equivalent politics in the pre-modern era. The distinguishing characteristic of the politics of the modern era is the decisive significance of mass mobilization, mass appeal and popular legitimization of elite rule.

This is not something that is only found in the modern democracies. It is crucial for authoritarian, dictatorial and quasi-democratic regimes as well. In these cases the capacities for mass mobilization are weaker and the relationship between popular sanction and elite governance less direct. But who can deny that even dictatorships must pay attention as never before to moulding and influencing popular perceptions? Centralized control over key networks of communication is the *sine qua non* for political monolithism. Ruling classes, too, have to obtain a popular sanction of sorts whether it be coerced and/or persuaded, to justify their dominance in the name of their maintenance or extension of 'national popular interest'. This stands in contrast to the legitimations sought by the absolutisms and monarchisms of

the past. The politics of the communal appeal today are thus in an altogether different register from the politics of religious appeal in the past.

Having affirmed communalism's modernity, what then of its definition? The term 'communalism' was first used by British colonialists to describe the situation of colonies like India and Malaysia, where religious minorities existed alongside a religious majority. The colonial use of the term gave it a negative connotation of bigotry, divisiveness and parochialism, thus helping to justify the colonial civilizing mission. It was also a way of understanding Indian history as colonialists saw and lived it. It apparently corresponded to the pattern of colonial expansion—defeat of the Mughal Empire, of Hindu princely kingdoms, of Ranjit Singh's Sikh empire. Indian nationalists adopted the term, accepted its negative significations, but saw it as a colonial, post-British phenomenon rather than a pre-colonial circumstance that the British inherited. Since, contrary to earlier hopes, communalism did not progressively decline after Partition and Independence, the task of reassessing the situation and searching for a deeper understanding of it has assumed new urgency.

The most sustained theoretical discussion on this issue has been within the ranks of the Indian Left. The most influential argument has maintained that communalism is essentially an ideology. The variant meanings or complex layers of this cluster concept have been left aside in favour of an unproblematic understanding of ideology as sets of beliefs which in this case *falsely* represent the interests of a social group.⁵ Here religion as such, even religious ideology, has little or nothing to do with communalism. Communal politics is the politics of religious identity; but beyond marking out the social category in question, religious identity itself has little to do with the phenomenon of communalism. Such a definition is modular. It can just as casually characterize other forms of communitarian 'false consciousness', such as casteism or regionalism.

Apart from reducing communalism to essentially a species of manipulation, and endorsing a purely instrumentalist understanding of the relationship between religion and communalism, such a definition necessarily advocates the propagation of a counter-ideology of anti-communalism as not just one dimension of the struggle against communalism but as the *central* terrain of combat. But if communalism is an ideology, and a modern one at that, then what of its structural anchors in modern capitalist society? To what extent can the struggle against communal ideology be divorced from the struggle against its social underpinnings, whether classes, castes or institutions? How important is it to deal successfully with the alienations associated with capitalist modernity, which foster collective identity crises that in turn promote acceptance of essentialist notions of culture and biology and enhance the attractions of identity politics in both its positive and negative forms? Can all this be perfunctorily acknowledged but effectively brushed under the carpet while one prepares for the supposedly

⁵ B. Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, New Delhi 1984.

decisive ideological onslaught on communalism? Are one's *strategic* allies to be found among all those political formations which, whatever their communal practice, avoid endorsement of communalism in their programmes?

There is another approach that has been sharply critical of the view that communalism is above all else an ideology. Here communalism is situated (in ideology and practice) as an aspect of ruling-class politics.⁶ The merits of this description are two-fold. It insists on the deep connections between the class and power relations of a society and the phenomenon of communalism, and following from this it stresses the indissoluble linkages between the struggle against communalism and the wider struggle against the prevailing social order and for socialism. However, this approach also has weaknesses. For one thing it is an overly political definition preoccupied with political society, leaving little space for grappling with the more 'non-political' sources and directions of communalism. For another it is strongly biased towards a functionalist explanation of the relationship between the reproduction of social power and the reproduction of communal relations in India, and thus suffers from all the usual problems of functionalist argument.

I would venture to put forward a third definition.⁷ But first there must be some prior exploration of the meaning of secularism and secularization. The task is made difficult by the absence of a single, universally accepted, definition.⁸ Though secularism usually implies

⁶ R. Singh, 'Communalism and the Struggle Against Communalism: A Marxist View', *Social Scientist*, August–September 1990. 'Communalism in contemporary India, as ideology and practice, is above all an aspect of the politics of the ruling classes in a society with a massive feudal-colonial inheritance, deep religious divisions, and undergoing its own, historically specific form of capitalist development' (p. 19).

⁷ A. Vanaik, *The Painful Transition*, London 1990. See chapter four on 'Communalism and Hindu Nationalism'.

⁸ The definition of secularism (either as a state of affairs or as an ideology) and of secularization is tied to one's definition of religion and the 'religious', not always deemed synonymous. The first problem for any general conception of secularization is how to define religion in a broad all-inclusive way, so as to fit all so-called religions, sets of religious beliefs and practices. What is the irreducible essence of religion that separates it decisively from what is thought to be secular? Such attempts at a broad, inclusive definition should in fact be avoided; they would only lead to a conceptual quagmire. For our purposes it is enough to focus on the 'world historic religions' which share preoccupations with 'salvation' and 'transcendence', and to discuss the secularization thesis in regard to them. Confucianism is then excluded as a religion and seen as a secular creed.

Combining the insights of Weber and Durkheim, many sociologists of religion see the religions as an eternal category. Man is in essence a religious animal. This renders 'secularization' a nugatory term, except for limited conceptual purposes and geographical spaces. Since the religious can never progressively decline or disappear, it can only change its forms; secularization is not so much the embodiment of religious decline as the registration of these changing forms—for example, routinization-secularization in the functioning of churches in the US, or the rise of a pluralist religious market where competing religions, sects, cults, and so on, sell their respective therapeutic wares. See P.L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, London 1969; P. Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularization*, London 1977. Alternatively, the thesis of secularization-as-decline is accepted, but it is frankly denied that secularization is a significant trend

some attack or restraint on religious power or reach, the acceptable degree and scope of this 'assault' is a matter of dispute. The dominant view is one of coexistence between the domains of the secular and sacred—the state and the 'public' falling within the ambit of the former, and the 'private' within the ambit of the latter. This is, in effect, a rationalization of the history of secularization of the state, and much of civil society, in post-feudal western Europe. Here, the consolidating processes of capitalist modernization, bourgeois democratization, nationalism and secularization, moved more or less in the same direction, even though there remained substantial regional variation in the way these processes combined.

The minority view of secularism and secularization has been more atheist in slant. It has stressed, in the name of a consistent and universalist humanism, the need to centre existence on man and his autonomy, and therefore to reject comprehensively the sacred, mythological and metaphysical world-views associated with religion. Secularization here would mean a many-sided process involving the progressive decline of religious influence in the economic, political and social life of human beings, and even over their private habits and motivations. A Marxist view of secularism, while obviously not coterminous with this tradition, sits firmly within it. But whatever one's understanding of secularism, for the secularist, communalism must imply some degree of de-secularization.

My own provisional and tentative definition of communalism in a religiously plural society is as follows: it is a process involving competitive de-secularization (a competitive striving to extend the reach and power of religions), which—along with non-religious factors—helps to harden the divisions between different religious communities and increase tensions between them. Here greater importance is granted to religious forces, religious identity, religious competition, religious ideologies and to religious imbrication in popular, folk and elite cultures. The development of a strong collective religious identity among Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians is not a sufficient condition

⁸ (*cont.*)

anywhere outside Europe, and even there its 'achievements' are said to be grossly exaggerated. See D. Martin, *The Religious and the Secular*, London 1969.

Generally, those who reject or strongly qualify the secularization thesis seek to conjoin religion and modernity. Indeed the idea of the religious being eternal and religion being coterminous with culture leads to a replacement of the issue of how, why and to what extent religious influence is declining with the issue of where religion or the religious stops. Where it was once fashionable in the US to overstress the secularity of American life, it has become more fashionable since to overstress its religiosity. Such a position is based on the following premisses: (1) Its advocates have a strong sociological bias towards theories of social order and stability rather than of conflict. (2) Religion is deemed crucial for providing the normative foundations for social order. (3) They share Weber's view of the relationship between the Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism. (4) They see secularism/secularization as the 'gift of Christianity', especially of Protestantism. These premisses are disputed by, among others, B.S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, 2nd edn, New Delhi 1991; S. Amin, *Eurocentrism*, New York 1988; S.N. Eisenstadt, 'The Protestant Ethic Thesis', in R. Robertson, ed., *Sociology of Religion*, Harmondsworth 1969; R.K. Fenn, 'Religion, Identity and Authority', in R. Robertson and B. Holzner, eds., *Identity and Authority*, Oxford 1980.

for the growth of communalism, but it is seen as a necessary one. Moreover, non-religious factors are not excluded as important causal factors. Indeed, the non-religious is often misperceived in religious terms. Only a comprehensive examination of the religious and secular dimensions, the political and non-political terrains of human activity, in Indian society can establish the necessary and sufficient conditions for the growth of communalism.

Communal Politics

If we now focus on the more specific problem of communal politics, we are immediately confronted with two broad questions. First, what lies behind the communal appeal? Though the identity crisis of an urban middle class undergoing modernization and therefore partial Westernization has been receptive to such appeals, it is usually the case that their origin has been elitist and their purposes secular. There is considerable authority in the instrumentalist argument that religion, whether in the form of faith or ideology, has little to do with the formation of such appeals—beyond the obvious point that some of its symbols, myths and devotional themes are selectively misappropriated.

Here a 'materialist' analysis of the sources of communalism in the colonial and post-colonial period would reveal the role of the colonial state in deliberately exacerbating the communal divide. Competition for jobs created tensions between Hindu and Muslim urban middle classes and elites. In post-Independence India, attention would no doubt be focused on the socioeconomic changes that have taken place in many northern Indian towns possessing a sizeable Muslim population, as a result of Gulf remittances, the growing export demand for handicrafts and artisanal products, and other expressions of uneven development. These have been among the socioeconomic changes that have clearly disturbed traditional patterns of dependence between Hindu traders and Muslim artisans. Similarly, Green Revolution effects in Punjab are not without communal resonance for the Sikh kulak and Hindu trader. Then again, there is the upward economic and political mobility of the agrarian bourgeoisie, of the upper echelons of the intermediate castes, and this has had its social and emotional reflection in a greater striving towards association with a broader Hindu identity. There is nothing wrong with such explanations. They are an important part of the story, but only a part.

There is also a second question: why the success of the communal appeal? Here it becomes impossible to maintain any artificial separation between 'true' or 'folk' religion on the one hand and communalism on the other. For what unites 'folk' and 'elite' religion, its 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' forms, is something intrinsic to the nature of all the main world religions—Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. We are here on the socio-psychological terrain of identity, of the relationship (never static) between religious belief and the socio-psychic need to affix one's sense of self, or more correctly one's senses of selves. This individuation can only be established simultaneously with the affixing of social identity(-ies). Among the many functions of religion and religious belief, this is arguably the

crucial one, and is common to all believers from whatever social strata. While the claims of a religious philosophy or ethics can be universalist, this function of identity fixation/affirmation must *always* be particularist. A believer is Hindu or sub-Hindu, Christian or sub-Christian, Islamic or sub-Islamic, and so on, even if this particularist identity can itself be an expansive one. The communal appeal thus derives much of its formidable character not just from the resources of power accumulated by the one making the appeal, but also from the importance of religious identity in the psychic health of the receiver. This is not to invest it with incontestable powers. The importance of religious identity is itself a historical and social variable. Where substantial secularization of state and civil society has taken place, religious identity in social—and psychic—life is less important, and the communal appeal correspondingly less successful or attractive. Since the formation and expansion of religious identity ‘from below’ takes place largely in civil society, an inversion of secular emphasis concerning state and civil society is needed, especially for societies like India.

Outside of the advanced West, in much of west, south and southeast Asia, for example, there have been far more complex patterns of development in the relationship between modernization/secularization and de-secularization. It is as well to remind ourselves that, even in those social formations where the capitalist mode of production is dominant, there is no single pattern of evolution that explains the overall process of secularization of different social formations. Particular social formations possess specific combinations of the secular and non-secular which have emerged from their specific histories. In the later modernizing societies of the post-colonial countries, where the state played a more important role in carrying out something of a forced industrialization, there is all the more reason to expect sharper disparities between the modernizing-secularizing pretensions of the state and the slower-changing realities of civil societies. In Turkey under Kemal and in Iran under the Shah, efforts to secularize the state and its laws, while not without merit or effect, did not so much reduce overall religious influence as *displace* it onto civil society, in certain respects reinforcing its power there. It has remained a latent force fully capable of resurfacing and encroaching on the state domain. Post-Shah Iran is a classic example; post-Communist Poland perhaps another more qualified one.⁹

In India, a non-denominational state with substantially secularized laws, resting on a basically secular Constitution, coexists with a civil society where religious influence is pervasive. It is a situation that gives rise to profound tension. Even the flawed ‘secularity’ that the Indian state possesses makes it a crucial bulwark against the growing tide of communalism. Its secularity must be strengthened and

⁹ The relationship between secularization and de-secularization need not be dialectical, that is, two moments of the same process. It can also be one of adjacency or juxtaposition with minor feedback loops. These two processes can respectively pertain to distinct spaces—for example, state and civil society; or to distinct ethnic groups—Britons of Asian and non-Asian origin; or to dominant and dominated classes. (Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*.)

deepened. But the crucial challenge lies elsewhere, in civil society itself. In this respect one is struck by the contrast between the United States and the United Kingdom. The former may have inscribed in its Constitution the famous clause about the 'wall of separation' between religion and the state, drawing comparison with the theocratic trappings of the British state. But British civil society (with the exception of Northern Ireland) bears no relation to the American situation, where Church membership is growing and Church influence on community/social life and as a pressure group on government is far more pervasive and powerful.¹⁰

Clearly, even in Western secular societies, there is considerable variation in the extent to which different states and civil societies are secularized. If in Protestant western Europe church membership is declining overall (although religion retains its importance for the life-cycle rituals marking birth, the transition to puberty, adolescence, adulthood, marriage/procreation, and death), in the USA, Ireland and eastern Europe, it is probably increasing. The possibilities of further secularization, or even of sustaining current levels of secularity, would seem to be intimately tied to the fate and future of civil society. The progressive decline of religious influence in this realm (as in much of western Europe) does not signify its progressive abandonment in personal and family life. In that respect the expectations of many mainstream sociologists in the fifties have not been borne out. But in so far as religious identity occupies a decreasingly significant role in everyday life, in those collective endeavours that form such a large part of peoples' economic, political and social routine, the politics of religious identity loses much of its purchase. Where this is not the case, secular gains could over a longer time span prove more ephemeral. The relationship of secularization—desecularization, of state and civil society, and what it implies for a practical programme of struggle against communalism in India, is something we will return to after a brief look at the Hindu nationalism and the anti-secularism that would take their distance from it.

The Hindu Nationalist and the Anti-Secularist

The Hindu nationalist both misunderstands and understands the nature of nationalism. He or she is wrong to see nationalism as a natural entity. Since the nation is a 'collective state of mind striving to become a political fact', it possesses an inherent fluidity which makes it capable of dying out, of metamorphosing, of standing on a variety of cultural foundations. The historical debate on the nature of Indian culture—whether it is essentially Hindu, whether it is possible to establish the essentially Hindu, whether it is religiously composite

¹⁰ Durkheimian sociologists who believe that the USA in some sense holds the mirror of the future of secularization elsewhere have developed the notion of 'civil religion'—that is, the American Way of Life which binds the country. This is an ethos which encompasses the specifically religious ethos of the three main faiths, Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, yet is significantly shaped by them, particularly Protestantism. For criticisms of the civil religion argument in its strong version, see Turner; Fenn; and from another angle, Martin.

—both stands apart from Indian nationalism and is importantly connected to it. It is connected because a sense of national identity is constructed in part from competing interpretations of the raw materials of history. It stands apart because Indian nationalism is not ‘logically’ constructed out of some notion of ‘accurate’ history. This is not a modern-day culmination of any particular cultural-historical logic, nor does it naturally rest on some cultural-historic ‘essence’ rooted in the past and enduring through the ages. Indian nationalism is *not* naturally Hindu nationalism; nor, incidentally, is it naturally a composite or secular nationalism. It may be *desirable* to rest it on composite cultural foundations which also have their own traditions, but that is something else. Secular nationalism, or at least the absence of a Hindu nationalist political order, does not derive its legitimacy from History or the past but from its promise, not from origins as much as from its desirable effects. A social order which is to be progressively humanist and democratic *cannot* simultaneously be Hindu nationalist or communally founded. This is sufficient to define the legitimacy of secularism. Indian nationalism is something whose cultural-emotional content must be fought for. Here the Hindu nationalist understands full well his or her task. To make the case for Hindu nationalism persuasive, individuals and groups have launched a veritable onslaught at the cultural, ideological, social and political levels, primarily from their positions in civil society. Part of this onslaught involves recourse to a systematic distortion of history, to the dogmatization and territorialization of Hinduism. This could accurately be described as its attempted Semitization—centring Hinduism on specific texts, gods and goddesses, places of worship, myths, symbols, and so forth, that are to be made pre-eminent and widely acknowledged as such. To the extent that this is possible it serves psychologically to ‘unify’ the diverse Hindu community in a way which the Hindu nationalist hopes will substantially diminish the relevance of other identities like class, gender and caste. For these identities can form the basis for mobilization around demands which erode this unity and provide potential for organization across religious divides. This is a general Hindu nationalist perspective and effort whose prospects for success are crucially premised on the psychic and social power of religious identity.

Is the anti-secularist better able than the ‘Westernized’ secularist to meet the challenge of communalism in general and of Hindu nationalism in particular? The anti-secularist certainly thinks so. Her or his attack on secularist positions is both philosophical and political. Philosophically, the anti-secularist is a cultural relativist who will not usually hesitate to launch a broadside against the ‘conceptual colonialism’ of Enlightenment and Rationalist thinking, with its universalist notions of Progress, Reason, Science (and Secularism). Some of the criticism has substance. The arguments are by now well rehearsed and did not originate with the anti-secularists. The problem of ‘cultural translatability’, for example, is a very real one. For a society that knows no linguistic, cultural or conceptual equivalent to the notion of secularism, how is such an idea to become meaningful beyond the circle of a narrow, Westernized elite? How is it to be made acceptable to the masses, short of imposition and accompanying repression—

which, understandably and legitimately, would evoke popular resistance?¹¹

However, it is one thing to raise the question: 'How can one judge societies and cultures from outside their own terms of reference, norms and meaning?' It is another to replace this serious if somewhat plaintive query with the close-minded, aggressive reprobation: 'How dare one judge cultures from the "outside"?', or with external criteria of value, as the Indian secularist is presumably wont to do. Such extremism allows no space for willed and purposeful societal change, brought about in part by universal human capacities to judge, discard and select from a range of human practices, beliefs and values—a range which becomes broader as more cultures meet, cross-fertilize and even clash.¹² Each history and culture is capable of change; indeed each provides meaning to the notion of change by way of a common horizon of reference involving a notion of 'progress' with a small 'p'. And surely histories flow into and diverge from History! We no longer live in a time of parallel, isolated histories, and there is much to be gained, for example, from the universalization of ideas and practices associated with the goals of mass political democracy, gender and racial equality. Where cultures, in the name of their distinctive traditions, oppose such processes, they are likely to lose out in the long run, due not to alien imposition but rather to the fact that each society possesses a critical self-awareness. People can and do *learn* from their own history and, when it becomes possible to do so, from the cultural, historical Other.

Should secularization also be considered a desirable universal? The anti-secularist says No! In its place he or she would eschew the extravagant quest for understanding and appreciation across religious divides and settle more modestly for the 'mutual tolerances' that emerge out of the 'lived relations' between different religious communities.¹³ But does this answer anything? How is the communal

¹¹ T.N. Madan, 'The Concept of Secularism', paper presented at the National Seminar on Secularism in India, organized by the Indian Academy of Sciences and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 25–27 September 1989.

¹² See the excellent critique of relativism by S.P. Mohanty: 'Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism', in the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1989.

¹³ The Indian experience shows that the relationship between religious pluralism, individualism and secularism is much more complicated than in the standard US-based model where religious pluralism has strong connections to the privatization of religious concerns, the absence of Church-State conflict, and the immigrant nature of American society. Interestingly, where some American sociologists see Christianity as the source of secularization and democracy, some Indian scholars see Hinduism as the source of secular and democratic impulses in India. If Christianity is perceived as the master key to world history, Hinduism is perceived as the master key to Indian evolution. In addition, both modern Christianity and modern Hinduism call attention to their 'innate tolerance'. It has been said that Christian ecumenicalism is the laying of ground rules to rationalize intra-Christian religious competition. In the past, Hinduism's renowned 'tolerance' was the result of its lack of self-consciousness and the very absence of a 'Hindu' coherence or any notion of a 'Hindu community'. Caste (an expression of social intolerance) was the organizing principle. Today's self-consciously avowed claim of tolerance by Hindus is more often than not the intolerant expression of feelings of religious superiority to the Semitic faiths, specifically Islam.

challenge to be met? By counterposing to it a 'positive' anti-secularism? As a perspective, the use of faith as the main resource against communalism might seem appropriate and perhaps necessary in the Indian context. But as a strategy it is almost certainly disastrous.

The anti-secularist, like many a secularist, insists on retaining an instrumentalist view of the relationship between religion and communalism. He or she must separate religion into its tainted and untainted parts. The latter is to be used against the former: that is, the *ethical resources* of religion constitute the most important armoury of weapons for resistance to communalism. It is a question of the 'good' politics of religious appeal versus the 'bad' politics of religious appeal, and isn't the Mahatma one of the most important exemplars of the effectiveness of this strategy?

As well as representing too one-sided an evaluation of Gandhi's effectiveness, and ignoring the issue of how to 'institutionalize' the struggle against communalism, this is a fatal strategy. It argues and fights on the terrain of the communalist or Hindu nationalist. The communal appeal will prove stronger for reasons that go to the very heart of the function and purpose of religious faith. Humans do not believe because above all else they wish to be good, but because above all else they wish to find a home in the universe. No doubt because religion is a world-view that provides much more than ontological solace (a moral ethic, an epistemology), its ontological function by association becomes even more powerful. But it *is* this which is primary. Religious morality gives power to religious identification, but it is the latter that is more fundamental. Communal politics links itself explicitly to the deepest psychic needs of identity enhancement and securement, beside which questions of religiously sanctioned good or bad behaviour are secondary. They cannot have the same power and appeal. The anti-secularist, by refusing to outlaw the 'politics of religious identity' as a strategic goal, helps to extend and consolidate its legitimacy.

Both the communalist and the anti-secularist are moved to take their respective approaches partly because of a shared exaggeration of the power and importance of religion. A world completely without religious faith may be inconceivable, contrary to certain versions of Utopia. But even at its strongest point—the issue of identity—religion has had to retreat. In order to venture a global generalization subject to spatial and social variation, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the most powerful collective identity of our times—the most important contemporary form of a 'social we'—is not religion, caste, ethnicity, gender or any 'primordial' identity. Nor is it class. It is nation and nationality. The most powerful is not the same as the most enduring. Like all historically constituted identities, it is subject to transcendence, decline and death.

But germane from our point of view is the question: why is the power of nationalism so great? It is a force so powerful that numerous forms of transnational identification and mobilization—class, gender or sisterhood, racial or black solidarity, Third Worldism, the pan-religious

loyalties of an earlier era—have all suffered ignominious defeat when they have sought to confront nationalism head on. We have yet to develop an enduring and widespread internationalist sentiment or sense of belonging that goes beyond the emotions of charitable concern and vague fellow feeling. Even horror at poverty becomes more acutely felt, our determination to fight it stronger, if we tell ourselves that our *own* nationals have no business to be suffering so. The Hindu ‘revivalist’, it should be noted, cannot dare to challenge nationalism in the name of a higher or stronger allegiance to a wider pan-Asian Hinduism. The references to an ancient geography of Hinduism stretching from the Middle East to the Southeast Asian archipelago can focus emotions on the ‘Muslim Betrayal’ via Partition (the ‘rape of Mother India’) and on the expansive ‘grandeur’ of Hinduism’s past. But, fundamentally, it is ammunition to help culturally redefine the foundations of the Indian Union. The Hindu ‘revivalist’ does not confront nationalism in the name of a *greater* religious loyalty but seeks to coopt it.

This exceptional character of nationalism surely lies in its unique combination of politics and culture, of civic power (the importance of citizenship) and identity. The nation-state for the first time invests ordinary people (through the principle of equal citizenship rights) with an authority and importance that is historically unique. Political democracies go further than dictatorships in respect of this investment of limited power in the masses. We have not gone beyond these limits of liberal democracy as yet. But what has been gained is significant and worth defending. To date the zenith of popular individual empowerment is political citizenship, whose frame of operation is the nation-state or multinational state.¹⁴ Does this contain a clue as to how we can more effectively tackle communalism in India? I think it does.

Secularism and Socialism

Although civil society in India is weak, its institutions are growing and indeed developing. It is an area of contestation where consciously secular forces are weak and lack backing from the state, which has not sought to challenge seriously the expansion of religious influence outside its domain. The struggle lies between, on one hand, an expanding, self-confident and self-redefining Hinduism and an orthodox Islam engaged in a powerful operation of retrenchment within an inward-looking and now psychologically besieged Muslim community, and on the other hand, the secular mechanisms of expanding market relations, modern technology and science, corporate and non-corporate bureaucratization, urbanization, and class divisions and struggles in industry and agriculture. In crucial areas of civil society,

¹⁴ Supra-nationalism, if it is to be stable and enduring (Western Europe), must retain the institutional foundations of this popular empowerment. If it is to survive, it cannot go backwards. Indeed, it will have to offer more than what has so far been achieved if it is not to be merely another label for a loose confederation of national structures of political power only slightly diluted by the requirement to come together in this way. A truly supra-national unified Europe will have to be more secular, not less, than it is today.

like education, health, recreation, welfare services, the private media, even trade unions and political parties, secularization has been extremely slow and uneven. In the face of all this it is disturbing that Indian secularists in the main are prepared to ignore civil society in favour of a one-sided stress on strengthening the secular nature of the state, supplemented perhaps by mass ideological campaigns in support of a secular interpretation of Indian nationalism. This is useful, no doubt, but it avoids confrontation on the terrain where communalism's deployments are strongest.

What was possible in the West is no longer possible in countries like India. The struggle to defeat communalism decisively, to eliminate it as a danger, is inseparable from the struggle to dismantle capitalism and replace bourgeois democracy with a socialist democracy, one that is freer and that invests more power in popular hands than is at all conceivable within a liberal-democratic capitalist order. Why should this be so? Is this claim not a retreat to a Marxist dogmatism that has been clearly refuted by reality—a return to a Utopian millenarianism that has been in practice the source of a tragic ideological and political totalitarianism?

These are large issues, and to make a case for a classical Marxist vision of socialism in the last decade of the twentieth century—after 1989 and all that—would take us far from our immediate area of investigation. Suffice it to say that the most powerful assault on the idea that liberal-democratic capitalism is the 'end of history' cannot but take recourse to the wellsprings of classical Marxism, to its analytical resources and to its alternative vision of the future. Far from being outdated or defunct, the quest, in the light of the global ecological crisis, for a global alternative to capitalism is more urgent than ever.

In the specific case of India, the connections between its weak capitalism, liberal democracy and communalism are so strong that progressive secularization can no longer be confidently visualized as the more or less inevitable outcome of an Indian 'long march' of capitalist modernization and liberal-democratic consolidation. Under capitalism a necessary, though by no means sufficient, condition for secular advances in civil society, especially in the fields of health, education, child-care, recreation, is the creation of a strong welfare state on the model of the best of the West European countries, though these welfare states have themselves run into trouble as a result of growing bureaucratization and declining long-term economic-growth rates. However, strong welfare states were never a gift from above by a prospering capitalist or ruling class, but everywhere represented the fruits of the pressure that a well-organized and united labour movement could bring to bear on a given state or ruling-class order. In the countries of advanced capitalism, where the relationship of forces between capital and labour has been historically most strongly inclined in favour of the former (for example, the US), welfarism has been the weakest.¹⁵

¹⁵ Turner (*Religion and Social Theory*) is among the few writers to have stressed the structural differentiation in respect of 'existential dilemmas', of how religious responses to 'meaning of life' questions tend to be more intellectualized for dominant classes and

In India, which has claim to one of the most fragmented labour movements anywhere, state welfarism, to the degree that it was encouraged, was the result of the Nehruvian social-democratic vision. That era is now gone for good, and in the new climate of 'market friendly' economic development even a prolonged Indian economic miracle may not lead to a substantial 'welfarism from above', which for all its bureaucratic deficiencies was for the West still a signal advance from the rapaciousness of prewar capitalism. What if the Indian economy does not take off as a result of the dramatic policy changes recently instituted, but instead carries out a rerun of the Latin American experience? In that case the existing division of responsibilities between the capitalist state and religious institutions in civil society entrusted to carry on and expand their welfarist functions will be strengthened. Religion as a social power has always derived much of its strength from its ability partially to redress material-secular needs. Such an order reinforces particularist religious (and caste) loyalties. Hindu nationalism has the material infrastructure of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its offshoots; orthodox Indian Islam has its own infrastructure of religiously controlled schools, sports clubs, cultural organizations, presses, credit agencies, work cooperatives, and so on.

If capitalism knows how to utilize existing divisions to ensure its reproduction and stabilization, bourgeois democracy plays its own part in reinforcing communal divides. Effective political competition in a liberal democracy means subordinating normative ideals to the practical task of successful mobilization and organization of pressure. It means moving along the path of least resistance, that is, building upon and mobilizing on the basis of existing identities and given levels of consciousness. If caste and religious community feeling is already strong, if their structures already exist and are socially effective, then these are likely to be reinforced by the way in which electoral competition operates. This has clearly been the experience of post-Independence India, where even centrist, 'secular' parties have sought to work with, rather than against, more overtly communal bodies.

A programme for de-communalizing India must give the highest priority to the building of secular counter-institutions in civil society and to promoting a more secular popular culture.¹⁶ To erode in this

¹⁵ (*cont.*)

more mundane—that is, related to questions of health, terrestrial power, security and wealth—for socially more insecure and oppressed classes and groups. His 'corporeal sociology of religion', influenced by Foucault, insists on linking existential questions to the biographical history of our bodies. The theory and practice of health is thus linked to the theory and practice of religion.

¹⁶ Popular culture and recreation in India are segmented along religious and caste lines. The one exception to this is sport. It is not at all surprising that anti-communal groups, in their propaganda efforts to promote communal amity and stress the composite character of Indian society, should have made references to the composite character of, for example, the national cricket team. A very effective poster brought out by the Bombay-based anti-communal group Ekta ('Unity') featured photographs of four Indian cricketers: a Sikh, Maninder Singh; a Hindu, Kapil Dev; a Muslim, Mohammed Azharuddin; and a Christian, Roger Binny. The poster in Hindi, Marathi and English read 'We can play together, we can live together.' To stress sport's potential for promoting communal harmony is one thing, but the sexist character of such male-bonding rituals and the national-chauvinist potential of sport should not be forgotten.

way the social importance of religious identity is to seek democratization in its classical rather than 'liberal' sense. It implies the progressive erosion of power differentials between individuals and between groups, be this power social, economic or political in form and be the groups classes, castes or other communities. If the limited form of empowerment provided by national citizenship can be so corrosive of religious loyalty, or so effective in pushing religious and religious-political structures into a more wary and respectful appreciation of it, then it is not unrealistic to believe that qualitatively higher levels of such empowerment can further narrow the space of religious loyalty. Or else they can push it in a direction where the value of religious loyalty, fervour and belief becomes increasingly based on its commitment to an egalitarian universalism that is not essentially ideological or transcendental in character. This would be nothing short of a profound secularization of the religious mission itself—as is the case, for example, with liberation theology.¹⁷

This really is to tie the anti-communal struggle to the struggle for socialism itself. India is one of the few countries in the world where Communism remains a mass force; but while Communist state governments and leftist social movements have secular achievements to their credit, they sometimes compromised with caste and even communal appeals. Still influenced by Stalinism, they have yet to embrace an integral socialist democracy. The question of socialist democracy lies at the heart not just of the socialist project in India and elsewhere, but of the project for carrying out a progressive secularization of Indian life. For socialists to the left of modern-day social democracy, the means by which a socialist transformation in a liberal-democratic capitalist order may be brought about is still the most important unresolved strategic problem. But it is recognized that an indispensable part of such an overall strategy is the building of democratic *and secular* counter-institutions in civil society through a multiplicity of localized struggles, and the building of structures to coordinate and unite such struggles, albeit in a partial and limited *way*, through broader programmes and slogans and action networks, single and multiple-issue movements.

Since no realistic assessment of these times can ignore the fact that the mass appeal of socialism is probably weaker than at any time since 1917, is it the case that anti-communalists in India are doomed at best to carrying out a long-term holding operation for secularism? Things are not quite so difficult. To argue that capitalism and bourgeois democracy in India cannot be the preconditions for the decisive weakening of communalism is not the same as arguing that there is no

¹⁷ The Indian anti-secularist has not hesitated to cite Christian liberation theology in his support. But a chasm separates the two. For the anti-secularist the principal lines of demarcation are between believers and non-believers, the secularist and the non-secularist, the indigenous and the alien. At no point is he or she prepared to appropriate as its fundamental line of demarcation the operative principal of liberation theology at its best: the *social* divide between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. Characteristically, liberation theology sees Marxism as a valuable resource and Marxists as actual or potential allies, while the anti-secularist sees Marxism and Marxists as opponents or at best as irrelevant.

other scenario for the future than communalism's progressive escalation. To believe this is to believe that the logic of fascism is already upon us. It is far more likely that weakened but enduring bourgeois-democratic structures will coexist with communal tensions, more institutionalized patterns of discrimination against non-Hindu minorities, in much the same way as racism and bourgeois democracy in the West have coexisted. Of course this analogy must not be allowed to disguise the real differences between racism and communalism, and between the respective Western and Indian situations.

One crucial bulwark against communalism is the present-day Indian state. There is a real need to exert pressure to move it towards a more abstentionist position on religious matters. Its present interventionist role is insufficiently discriminating: it has all too often lapsed readily into a posture of actively balancing communalisms. It has intervened where it should not, and not intervened where it should. Indian civil society is not yet as secularized as in the West. In religious matters it is far more plural; and its dominant religion, Hinduism, lacks a centralized ecclesiastical structure. There is therefore an unavoidable interventionist role for the state—for example, in guaranteeing Untouchables entry into temples. But there is also scope for the further secularization of laws on marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and so forth. Also the state's promotional role on behalf of religion, carried out in the name of ensuring 'equal respect for all religions', should be ended. This latter is particularly noticeable with regard to government-controlled programming in the state-owned audio and visual media. It is also clear that a major dimension of the anti-communal struggle, namely the fight against Hindu nationalism, is crucially bound up with the anti-caste struggle. Caste is an identity that is more deeply felt than that of class. It has an emotional resonance stronger still than that of religion, because the social roots of caste oppression are deep and its social consequences all too real. Hindu nationalism can offer psychological uplift by its invocation of a wider Hindu unity resting on uniform affiliation. But it has no real answer to the material foundations of this intra-Hindu oppression.

The stronger the mobilization around the issue of caste, the more damaging it is to advocates of Hindu nationalism. A substantial majority of Hindus suffer caste discrimination and social disadvantage vis-à-vis the upper castes. Precisely because the Mandal Commission Report symbolizes the illegitimacy of caste disadvantages, mobilization for its implementation carries considerable potential for undermining a Hindu nationalism led by forces like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which are the political expression of Brahminical Hinduism.¹⁸ If the symbolic heart of Hindu nationalism is the

¹⁸ The government-appointed Mandal Commission came out in 1978 with a Report detailing the state of the 'socially and educationally deprived backward classes', which tied such backwardness (correctly) to caste status. According to it, roughly 52 per cent of Hindus—those between the Untouchables/tribals and the Brahmins/forward castes—fell into this category. The Report recommended that 27 per cent of central-government jobs and student placings in state-supported colleges be reserved for the backward classes or castes, in addition to the 23 per cent already reserved for Untouchables and tribals. This Report has been vociferously opposed by the upper castes, a

mosque built at Ayodhya by the Mughal Emperor Babar, which they want replaced by a temple dedicated to Lord Rama, then the struggle of oppressed castes has its own symbolic centre in the Mandal Commission Report, which has yet to be implemented. So far, Hindu nationalism has been the more adept at seizing its opportunities. But the *Dalits* (Untouchables) and the numerically large lower echelons of the backward castes are alert and could constitute an invaluable factor in the struggle against Hindu nationalism. They are a potent resource to build upon, and one which gives hope that a more decent Indian future can be built.

Postscript

The demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on 6 December by the forces of Hindu nationalism constitutes the most serious crisis in independent India's history. This was not only an engineered humiliation of India's huge Muslim minority (which is now more embittered and alienated than at any time since Partition); it was also a calculated assault on the very nature of the Indian state and its Constitution as bequeathed by the victory of the Independence struggle. India is now closer than ever before to having a Hindu state. This state, if—and depending on the way—it emerges, may be 'hard' or soft'. But even a 'soft' Hindu state will be a qualitative and dangerous step backwards from the non-denominationalist version of a weak secular state that exists today. However, the dramatic way in which Hindu nationalism showed its ugly face has also created a real space for secular forces and the Congress centre to take the initiative against them. Suddenly, the short-term task—of de-communalizing the purely political terrain and preserving the secular state—has become all important. Without doing this, the much longer-term and in effect more fundamental task of secularizing civil society—which has to wait—is hardly conceivable.

The situation cannot remain fluid for long. It will only be a matter of weeks or months, not years, before one side or the other engineers the sociopolitical relationship of forces in its favour. While the votes of village India decide which party rules at the centre, it has always been the cities and towns that determined the general direction, agenda and terms of discourse of Indian political life. In the last decade this agenda has been defined by Hindu nationalist forces because they alone showed the ability to mobilize and thus derive the power and sanction of a mass, if far from majority, following.

If the moral-political climate is to be changed in favour of those who insist that a non-religiously-affiliated state is the absolutely necessary

¹⁸ (*cont.*)

certain layer of which belongs to the lower middle classes and sees itself liable to suffer most should the Report be implemented. It was students belonging to this layer who led the anti-Mandal agitation against the former V.P. Singh government, resorting to self-immolation as a form of symbolic protest. The practical effect of implementation is very limited—for example, some 45,000 new central-government jobs would be affected annually. The real significance of the Report lies in its symbolic impact and message.

condition for the existence of a stable (formalized terrorism by Hindu and Muslim groups is now a real possibility) and morally decent and democratic order, then it can only come in two related ways. All parties (including the Congress) committed to the secular legacy of the National Movement must, for the first time, forge a common front to carry out sustained mobilization in major towns and cities against Hindu nationalism. The other key weapon remains the central government. What matters is not this or that policy—for example, the banning of communal organizations—but the determination of the government to impose its moral-political agenda even at the risk of widespread unpopularity. In a polarized situation, the middle ground of consensus politics—the only kind the Rao government has hitherto seemed capable of playing—is untenable. In short, the centre, steered by a party long grown arthritic, must nevertheless exhibit moral-political leadership as never before. History will not forgive today's principal secular actors if they fail the task before them.