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**As on a Darkling Plain:
Searching out the Critique of Hindu Ethnicism in Modern India**

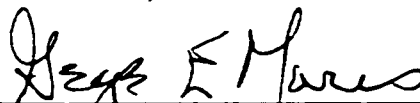
by

Deepa S. Reddy

**A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE**

Doctor of Philosophy

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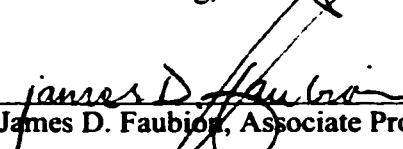
George E. Marcus, Professor and Chair, Anthropology



Julie M. Taylor, Professor, Anthropology



David Nirenberg, Associate Professor, History



James D. Faubion, Associate Professor, Anthropology



Stephen A. Tyler, Autrey Professor of Anthropology and
Linguistics

Houston, Texas

April, 2000

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*to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo,
an offering*

...And here we are as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold. "Dover Beach"

•

...God shall grow up while wise men talk and sleep ...
Sri Aurobindo,
Savitri: Book One, Canto IV

ABSTRACT

As on a Darkling Plain:

Searching out the Critique of Hindu Ethnicism in Modern India

by

Deepa S. Reddy

Critics and analysts of religious politics in India have described Hindu nationalism variously over the years: as fascist, fundamentalist, right-wing, jingoist, extremist, and ethnicist. The already large corpus of writing on the ideology and activities of the Hindu nationalists continues still to describe the serious threat of communal thinking to the secular/liberal character of the modern Indian state. What is missing from this discourse, however, is an interrogation of the very concepts on which both critiques of communal politics and defenses of secular-liberalism are based. What does it mean to understand 'fundamentalism' as the cultural 'other' of such liberal virtues as secularism and tolerance? What are the implications of constituting ethnicist movements not merely as obstacles, but as *threats* to the project of modernity? This dissertation examines first the dominant phraseology of such Indian intellectual critiques, arguing that narratives of ethnicism and extremism are created not only from within, by ethno-nationalist

ideologues, but also from without, paradoxically by the very liberal discourses that describe communal threats to secular modernity. Second, by tracing the evolution of feminist activism in Hyderabad, I trace also the processes by which liberal discourses of difference and diversity come to structure activist praxis, making ethnicity the dominant descriptor of social reality, and instituting a 'culture of ethnicism' that implicates both activist-intellectual and ethnicist. Working thus within the frameworks of secular liberalism, and bound by a pre-constituted opposition to political expressions of religiosity, the Indian activist/ intellectual community does not have the tools by which to understand the phenomenon of Hindu ethnicism. Finally, this dissertation suggests that Hindu religious ethnicism needs to be seen essentially as a challenge to the prevailing secular order that separates religious belief from the modern, the rational, the scientific, regarding it (at worst) as a pre-modern affliction, or (at best) as an individual, private expression of identity. Hindu ethnicist belief represents a rationality unto itself, I argue: a (religious) critique of the liberal logic of secularism; a religious ideology of tolerance and governance; a rationality of and for modernity that we can afford to ignore only at our own ultimate peril.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To my committee – George Marcus, Steve Tyler, Julie Taylor, James Faubion and David Nirenberg – I owe a special debt of gratitude, not only for intellectual guidance over the years, but for support, institutional and otherwise, and much-needed encouragement throughout. To them, I offer this work as *guru dakshina*: not so much a payment for services rendered, but a giving back of all things learned for the privilege of having learned them.

To my parents and sister I owe a debt of another kind, one that I know to describe even less. Their love and affection have kept me constantly in sight of my goals; their trust and faith in my abilities have pushed me always to exceed myself. My sister I think does not still know what I have been working on all these years, but all her telephonic interruptions and distractions have helped me keep my humor through the many difficult months of fieldwork and writing.

In India my list is long, but must begin with my parents-in-law. *Chakkani rajamargamu lundaga sandula dooranela, O manasa?* my father-in-law's responses to lines such as these from the songs of Tyagaraja moved me deeply, taught me to be moved deeply, and to wish myself for the knowledge of the 'straight royal path' of which the Saint spoke. My mother-in-law's enthusiasm for temple art and architecture, the energy that quickened her steps in the presence of a towering gopuram or delicate bronze enthused me too, roused me too. Together, my parents-in-law changed the very nature of my fieldwork by the example of their faith, caring for me all the while as my own parents with never any distinctions drawn. To them I owe much of the emotion behind this work. My dear brother-in-law gave up his room for almost a year so that I could have a place for my

ever-growing piles of paper and a desk at which to work; I owe him also much gratitude for his uncomplaining accommodations.

Kittumama has known this project since its infancy, and has watched me wrestle with it and with myself over the last two years. He altered his plans and endured all the difficulties of a prolonged absence from home to enable my fieldwork in Delhi. And there he compelled me to think and re-think my most basic assumptions, my most natural proclivities, often by reducing all things to a bewildering simplicity. My conversations with him inform much of what I have produced: directly or otherwise, obviously or not, they have been points of reference from which I have tried to write.

At Anveshi: to the staff – Rekha, Jaya, Shailaja, Srilakshmi – with whom I shared so many enjoyable days, so many delicious lunches, so many cups of tea, and of course so many, many hours of music; to Ravinder for making endless numbers of photocopies; to dear Sattamma for always making sure there was enough tea for me when I arrived; to the inimitable Ambi, always around looking for a new cause, full of laughter and full of spirit – much love, much gratitude. After all the trying moments that had made me want to flee Hyderabad (*and research and Anthropology*), Anveshi finally made me wish always to stay. I remember with special warmth also my many conversations with K. Lalita, who said simply that I should come and visit her whenever I felt like it, cutting through all my initial hesitance and wariness as no-one else did or could. ‘I think of you now as one of our Anveshi-members who lives far away,’ she said also when she visited Houston many months later. I will always be grateful for her friendship and her great generosity of spirit. My interaction with Susie Tharu was short, but her enthusiasm gave new direction to my work when I was most in need. Rama Melkote, D. Vasantha, Veena Shatruguna, Gita Ramaswamy, Vimal Balasubrahmanyam, and Vijayalakshmi each took time out of busy schedules to spend some hours talking with me about their work and lives, each filling in different portions of the Stree Shakti collage.

At Asmita: Kalpana Kannabiran was perhaps my first friend in Hyderabad; she spoke eloquently and forcefully of her work, tape-recorder running or not, and she and Vasanth

Kannabiran always made sure I was invited to every Asmita event – exhibitions, performances, readings, seminars – each of which broadened the scope of my work in new and unexpected ways. Vasanth Kannabiran, Volga and Jamila Nishad also spared precious time for lengthy interviews. The staff at Asmita were equally warm and forthcoming: Meera, Usha, Neena, Padmini, and Bhavani, among others, always saw cheerfully to my numerous requests for tapes, copies, information, and saw to it also that I always felt welcome in the Asmita office.

Dr. Y. Sreedhar Murthy allowed me to use his office almost as my own, invited me for many a meal with his family and saw to it that I was escorted to the train station on several trips back to Bangalore. His kind gestures eased so much of the tension of trying to live and work alone in an unfamiliar city. Mr. V.S. Murthy and Gowri Aunty took me, a virtual stranger, into their home for an undetermined length of time; their generosity made my first phase of fieldwork possible. The Bharadhwaj family did much the same for me in Delhi; my heartfelt thanks for their warmth and hospitality. Ravimama and Radhika aha, Surendramama, Madhu aha and Sowmya, and of course Ira Aunty pampered me thoroughly on wonderful weekend retreats in Banjara and Jubilee Hills. When in need, I knew always I could call on them.

Then there were the unexpected friendships of chance and circumstance: most importantly, Chris Chekuri, whose groundwork in setting up a flat in Habshiguda complete with fridge and phone has made it so much easier for many a graduate student to live and work there; and K. Govindarajan, Mani Meghala, and little Vishitha, whom I may never have come to know so well if I had not decided to live in Chris' flat and whose company I came to look forward to nearly every evening and every weekend. I had a new life in Hyderabad thanks to them, and equally a new, truly enjoyable experience of work. B.K. Sudhakar Reddy of the *Economic Times*, answered the phone when I happened to call in the initial stages of fieldwork; happened also to share many of my interests, and took me under his wing, as it were, for a time. I saw the insides of many a fine Hyderabad restaurant, first thanks to him, and was always grateful for the escape of an afternoon of good company and good conversation.

Shrikanth, my husband and friend of a hundred years, has known this project perhaps even before it was formed enough to consume my own interest. He has heard every inchoate thought and incipient argument, has given me pause and challenged me, but driven, encouraged, and supported me unstintingly throughout. Never fear controversy, both he and his father advised, much more by their example than by their words, and that crucial support of conviction gave me the confidence and the energy with which to write. To Shrikanth, then, I owe all of that which made the pen's ink flow smoothly. This work is, in many ways, as much his as mine.

And finally, affectionate gratitude to Ranajit-da, who told me to go to Hyderabad.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CONTAINER CONTAINED

prologue

In an essay that asks “Is there an Indian way of thinking?”, the South Asian scholar A.K.Ramanujan borrows a distinction from linguistics and applies it to culture.¹ The distinction is between the ‘context-free,’ and the ‘context-sensitive,’ and Ramanujan suggests that “although actual behavior may be more complex ... in India, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation.” So, descriptions of people, for example, might set aside generic words like ‘nice’ and ‘good’ in favor of “concrete contextual descriptions like ‘he brings sweets.’”² And as for utterances, so also for storytelling. Ramanujan recounts an episode from the *Mahabharata*:

In the forest, when the Pandava brothers are in exile, the eldest, Yudhishthira, is in the very slough of despondency: he has gambled away a kingdom, and is in exile. In the depth of his despair, a sage visits him and tells him the story of Nala. As the story unfolds, we see Nala too gamble away a kingdom, lose his wife, wander in the forest, and finally, win his wager, defeat his brother, reunite with his wife, and return to his kingdom. Yudhishthira, following the full curve of Nala’s adventures, sees that he is only halfway through his own, and sees his present in perspective, *himself as a story yet to be finished*.³

On this story, Ramanujan comments: “Very often the story of Nala is excerpted and read by itself, but its poignancy is partly in its frame, its meaning for the hearer within the fiction and for the listener of the whole epic ... what is contained mirrors the container;

¹ A.K.Ramanujan, “Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23/1 (1989) 41-58.

² The example is based on Richard Shweder’s work with “highly intelligent Oriya and American adults,” cited in Ramanujan 1989:52

³ Ramanujan 1989:48-9 (*italics added*).

the microcosm is both *within* and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it. Indian conceptions tend to be such concentric nests...⁴

This introduction is an effort, then, to describe the ‘concentric containments’ of the present project. It is less a description of work done than one of the contexts from which work emerged: less a description of what follows (though that too is outlined at the end) than of the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of what follows. Ramanujan writes that Indian epics are ‘stories encased in metastories’; that “within the text, one tale is the context for another within it.” He continues: “not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story, the inner illuminates the outer as well.”⁵ I draw on these ideas while writing, not necessarily to fashion a style, but to conceptualize, order and organically connect the different aspects of what I write. These are my metastories, or at least the ones that most readily come to mind. Others, I hope, will emerge along the way.

one fieldwork

The odd thing is, I realize now, that I could have known *almost* everything I was about to find out through fieldwork even before I had left for the field. *Almost* everything, that is, about the arguments, the intellectual debates, the clashes of opinion, the positions of women’s groups, the posturing of politicians. While writing grant proposals on activism and the ‘politics of secularism among middle-class Hindus’ I had remarked that most work on communalism in India had thus far been textually based, and it is easy now to see why this was the case: there is simply a staggering amount of material on this and a spectrum of related issues, written by people from diverse backgrounds, representing a

⁴ Ramanujan 1989:49, 51.

⁵ Ramanujan 1989:48.

wide range of critical positions. Not just once or twice was I turned down for a much sought-after interview (or half-heartedly granted one) with the suggestion that I read the several books or articles the person had already published on the subject. I learned to live with the frustration because I was forced to, but also because I discovered there was another side to what I saw as a problem. If newspaper articles routinely carried Op-Ed pieces dealing with communalism, the newspaper-reading middle-class public routinely responded. So conversations among friends, family members and even sometimes complete strangers, would frequently turn into lively and sometimes heated debates on religion and politics with myself the interested onlooker. It seemed that all one had to do was introduce a word like ‘communalism’ or ‘secularism’ in a room of people, and a discussion would quickly develop. This was, it seemed, *the* topic on everyone’s mind.

At first I took notes diligently, late at night, trying to remember details, turns of phrases, interesting examples. But as weeks turned into months, I realized that my encounters were by-and-large with a certain stock set of positions, many of which were defined in whole or in part by political alignments. There were those in the Left community (academics and activists mostly) for whom opposition to ethnicism and religious violence was life-blood⁶; for whom opposition to the BJP and Hindutva politics was part of a larger critique of upper-caste/upper-class privilege: a harsh and exacting self-critique, that is, which often came close to dismissing all things Hindu as a means of subverting majoritarianism. There were others, Hindu elites mostly, who expressed anger that anything the BJP stood for should even be considered Hinduism. ‘We are Hindus,’ they

⁶ I prefer to use the term ‘ethnicism’ rather than the usual ‘communalism’ or worse, ‘fascism,’ ‘fundamentalism,’ ‘jingoism’ as a means of distancing myself from the meanings

might have said. ‘and we can tell you that the BJP does not represent *real* Hinduism.’

Theirs was a position defined as much by opposition to Hindutva, as by a need to defend some essentialized version of ‘true’ Hinduism. Despite the steadily growing popularity of the BJP, openly supporting the party and its politics was still, in most middle-class circles, like taking a maverick position. So some of the Party’s supporters were only pro-BJP because they were anti-Congress: for fifty years, they would say, Congress politics has tormented this country, creating divides where none before existed, pitting one religious group against another and still hypocritically claiming the credentials of a secular party. The series of ‘apologies’ for all Congress’ past communal blunders issued by party spokespeople (including the new Mrs Gandhi⁷) in the wake of elections, only served to deepen this sense of distaste. Finally, there were those who were both anti-Congress and pro-BJP.

From my interactions with middle-class Hindus outside academic/activist settings, I had – perhaps naively – hoped to obtain a nuanced understanding of what Hindutva politics means on the ground, away from the din of rhetoric on the political center-stage and apart from the constant agitations of activist circuits. I wanted to explore how political ideology is refracted into the everyday, and in reverse how the everyday provides a basis for understanding and relating to the agendas of political ideology. Instead I found that speaking to people who were both anti- and pro-BJP was sometimes like reading several

and analytical perspectives usually associated with these words. A fuller explanation for this choice follows in Chapter One.

⁷ Sonia Gandhi, the Italian widow of Rajiv Gandhi and daughter-in-law of Mrs. Indira Gandhi (both former Prime Ministers), began campaigning for the Congress sometime before the February 1998 elections, at the request of Party workers who feared heavy losses without the continued charismatic association with the Gandhi name. After years of seclusion and avowed disinterest in politics, she took up leadership of the Congress soon after.

newspaper briefs all at the same time: the questions, the complaints, the arguments and indeed often the examples given all bore striking resemblance to those already widely circulated through the media.⁸ Population (the myth that Muslims have more children than Hindus because polygyny is permitted in Muslim communities), the Uniform Civil Code⁹, Article 370 (regarding certain special privileges for Kashmir), the Babri Masjid, and in short almost every major issue taken up by the BJP or its allies would each in turn become the central topic of conversation. The manner, method and substance of ordinary conversation at each new turn was almost unfailingly pre-constituted by the movements of a wider public discourse.¹⁰ Not just conversation, but cultural expressions too: installations of idols during traditional festivals like Ganapati Utsavam and Durga Puja would adopt certain themes that had been popular that year. In the wake of nuclear

⁸ Shortly after a day of rioting in Hyderabad's Old City, I happened to meet a journalist with the *Deccan Chronicle*, who I was told had covered the incidents for the paper. I asked him what had happened, and was quite amazed to hear him then repeat every detail *exactly* as it had appeared in the newspapers, and in much the same language too. I interrupted his narrative once to ask where he had been as the events unfolded, for surely he could not have been in *all* the locations where trouble broke out at the same time to have been able to see it all so clearly. In response, he merely told me where he had been and proceeded with his narrative as before.

⁹ Under the Indian legal system, inherited from the British, all religious communities are governed by a (secular) common code in matters of economics, commerce, crime and punishment and so on. In the crucial area of Family Law, the colonial government allowed the specific religious laws of the different communities to prevail, creating sometimes wide disparities between women in different religious groups. If there was a consensus that India needs a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) around the time of Independence, this has since all but broken down. I explore the issues involved at several junctures during the course of this thesis. For a more comprehensive account of the evolution of legal policies, see Flavia Agnes, *State, Gender and the Rhetoric of Law Reform*, Gender and Law: Book 2 (Bombay: Research Center for Women's Studies, SNDT University 1995) and Archana Parashar, *Women and Family Law reform in India* (New Delhi: Sage 1992).

¹⁰ Public discourse here would include political as well as academic/activist discourses: semi/academic commentaries on ethnicism are not by any means confined to the pages of scholarly journals, but are in some fashion or other on everyone's television sets, and in the newspapers and magazines (both English and vernacular) that arrive daily at nearly every Indian doorstep.

testing, arms and missiles were one such in Hyderabad; this year in Bengal, many Durga installations touch on the conflict with Pakistan over Kargil.¹¹



Figure 1: Expressions of faith in popular religion: an installation on Habshiguda Road No. 8 during the Ganapati Utsavam celebrations of September 1998.

Where then were the points of contact between larger ideologies and the minutiae of everyday life? And how was I to locate these? I was not inclined to assume that the repetition of certain standard arguments either drawn directly or derived from Hindutva ideology were indications of ethnicist brainwashing. And yet it often seemed as though there were no positions beyond those given by political discourse on the one hand, and Leftist academic discourse on the other. But was the battle always so clearly between 'the Left' and 'the Right'?

Surely this was not the case either. The project I had constructed for myself seemed at once too simple and too complicated.

¹¹ Other popular (and non-political) themes are also frequently incorporated into such installations: everything from 'Jurassic Park' to Bollywood film, for example. The installations remain in various bastis (localities) for about a week, after which they are carried in procession through the city and immersed in the ocean or a nearby lake.

two connections

Needless to say, there was no moment of epiphany. Nor did I find the proverbial 'key informant' who gave me all the right answers at just all the right moments. I realize in retrospect, however, that I was guided in no small measure by conversations with my husband's father, by his frequent reminder that the worlds of politics 'out there' were very much a part of the worlds of the personal 'in here.' Commenting perhaps on some recent event or debate, 'these are not just things that happen somewhere,' he would say, gesturing beyond the four walls of the room – and then pointing towards himself, his hand moving back and forth for emphasis: 'they touch us deeply, everyday.' The restless anthropologist in me wanted at once to know how, by what mechanisms, and through what processes these connections are made. The daughter in me was content just in the knowledge that *this was so*, even just knowing that the exact series of links between 'here' and 'elsewhere' may persistently elude. It would be no exaggeration to state that these twin impulses structured my life and my work in India: the one distanced, questioning, critical, restless; the other embedded in the world of my family, also questioning, also critical, but equally in doubt that the available rational arguments could in the end capture the depth of sentiments such as those my father-in-law often expressed.

All through my year in India, I continued to live in two worlds and as two people, as it were. The world 'out there' was the world of my research: women's groups, seminars, libraries, newspaper archives, development projects, pre-election meetings held by activist organizations, street plays, educational initiatives and more. This was also the world of political negotiation and policy-making, manipulation and intrigue, all of which interested me particularly because they fuelled much work done in activist circles. These

groups were my primary point of reference and in them, like most others around me, I was deeply self-conscious of my own Hindu and upper-caste background. To the very end, however, I remained distinctly uncomfortable with the apparent choice of rejecting my social background either by confessing it at every turn, or reducing it to a kind of ethnic fashion statement. The ground below was a virtual minefield of exciting ideas and initiatives; but the charged atmosphere was also exacting, exhausting.

I looked forward, at the end of each dusty day, to the relative calm of middle-class life with family. 'In here' were the small pleasures and comforts of everyday life: chasing the washer-woman's little daughter Satya around the backyard and hearing her gleeful squeals in what became something of a daily ritual between us: consuming vast amounts of my mother-in-law's delicious preparations, learning from her and then hesitantly trying out my newly-acquired skills for the family when she was away; spending time talking with my father-in-law about my work or something from the papers or more; teasing my husband's elderly grandmother about the filmy programs she watched on television as I watched along with her. But there was more. Here the activities of the day were structured, along with the cooking, the cleaning, the chores, the child-care, the pressures of work and household economics, also around religion and prayer. Flowers were picked in the early morning for the *puja*, which marked in effect the beginning of my mother-in-law's day. I often watched my father-in-law clean the puja room, change the wicks on the oil-lamps, arrange flowers at the head of each picture and at the feet of each idol, every gesture and every movement a consecration that I knew only to admire and not myself to emulate. Having readied the room, he would leave it for my mother-in-law to light the lamps, which she did twice a day, sitting there for a long time after

reciting or reading shlokas (prayer verses). The lamps then burned through most of the day and most of the night. At home in Bangalore or with the family I lived with for some months in Hyderabad, the women performed the daily pujas, and marked festival days in addition by creating elaborate and sometimes colorful designs at the doorsteps of the house, and by cooking special meals. When I first moved into the home of my host family in Hyderabad, sickly, nervous about fieldwork, and worried that I was imposing myself on near-complete strangers, Mrs. Murthy (or Gowri Aunty as I came to know her) assured me that if I had come there, it was because He – she pointed to a small photograph of the Shirdi Sai Baba on a shelf in the kitchen – had wanted the family to take care of me. In this atmosphere, where so much was given, understood, explained and practiced with reference to faith and belief, the tearing debates about communalism and ethnicism in the intellectual world of my daytimes seemed almost irrelevant.

But were they really so irrelevant? It is very easy, I think, to oppose the tumult of the world outside to the peace and relative quietude of home and family; the bawdiness of politics to the rectitude of religion; the large ferment of the public to the small constancy of the private. It is easy then to use the constructed separateness of these realms to argue for their mutual irrelevance. The idea that religion is an intimate, personal, and private matter is undeniably, however, the product of a modern strain of thought that privileges the individual and the personal over the collective, and demarcates the intimate and the private as areas of essential difference. Attractive as such ideas may be, in India at least religion does not lend itself well to such categorization. Quite simply this is because in the subcontinent religion is everywhere. It is in architecture and in art, both traditional and modern; it is in literature, both sacred and secular, in myth and in metaphor; it is

inscribed in craftsmanship and the handicraft industry: it is on clothes and on jewelry, on the drape of a man's dhoti or in the knot of his turban. Its icons are on posters and billboards: benevolent, cherubic faces painted in bright pinks and greens and blues; on a shelf somewhere in every merchant's shop, with a burning lamp, or incense, or a frame of fancy moving lights. Religious symbols even line staircases in some Hyderabad office buildings: the cross, the crescent moon, and Hindu deities on white tile all placed to prevent people ascending and descending from spitting there the red staining juice of the beetel nut they chew. It is in the beautiful and in the bizzare; in prejudice and in compassion; in pride and in humility; in the past and in the present; in the sacred and in the secular. In other words, there is no separate realm to which religion can easily be consigned. It exists as an all-encompassing continuum, the link between the then and the now, the here and the there.

Not a glamorous idea, this notion that faith in some shape could form the basis for identification with the far away worlds of politics and governance, and with fuzzy abstractions such as country and nation. Not even really a novel one, for have not Indian theorists for years attacked Hindutva ideology by pointing to its deployment of religion in advancing more hegemonic, homogenized concepts of "nationhood"? But I am not here interested in an analysis of Hindutva discourse itself, rather in what this discourse comes to mean to those Hindus who are willing to support it. Certainly, there was never *one* reason offered as justification for this support, but a variety of reasons, assessments and levels of identification that – in the end – provided the basis for political support. A builder in Hyderabad complained that even minor mistakes in construction would have to be corrected, whereas Sultan Owaisi's projects in the Old City were allowed to violate all

kinds of building codes because ‘the authorities did not have the guts to check him’.¹² A former government bureaucrat told me of having to go to court to prevent the mosque behind his home from using larger-capacity loudspeakers than those permitted, and from broadcasting classes as well as the daily prayers to the entire neighborhood. A housewife mentioned that she supported the VHP simply because they stood up for Hindu *dharma*.¹³ Beneath these different approaches to ‘Hindutva’ were also different approaches to *Hinduism*: the housewife and the builder were more concerned with ritual and daily prayer, whereas the bureaucrat told me the attraction of Hinduism for him was philosophical (in fact, that he could be both Hindu and atheist at the same time). Even so, the unifying factor in these and other narratives like them was – in some shape or form – religion, in belief, faith and practice.

This, I could not have known in advance of fieldwork. In spite having grown up with faith and ritual all around me, I have been well-schooled also in a range of modern assumptions about the place of religion in daily life, in assumptions about how its authenticity is given by certain practices and not others, certain beliefs and not others. So when my father-in-law’s comment insisted on the connection between distant events and

¹² Sultan Salahuddin Owaisi is the leader of the *Majlis-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen* (or MIM), which has been the dominant political force in the Old City of Hyderabad ever since the State became part of the Indian Union in 1948. Sultan Owaisi (or “Salar (the lord) Sahib” as he is commonly known) runs a virtual fiefdom south of the Musi River, and has been largely unchallenged until a recent split within the MIM formed a new party called the MBT (*Majlis Bachao Tahreek*). When I went with a friend to meet Salar Sahib, he treated us with the utmost courtesy, not even making us (women) wait long for an audience, and acting according to the ethic of “tehzeeb,” which means something like culture or good breeding. Others, however, have had vastly different experiences dealing with him: stories of his influence, power and fiery pro-Muslim speeches are far more common than those about his elegance and culture.

close realities. I was more inclined to assume that there must be a series of material connections between these things – or else what would explain the existence of such strong sentiments in favor of ethnicism? Mine was the approach of generations of theorists who, for example, postulated that the great ancient reservoir at Angkor Wat *must* have been built to facilitate the irrigation of paddy fields; that the vastness of such an undertaking could be explained only by its ultimate economic benefit. And for sure there were oftentimes these material links: the bitterness of seeing that a child was not admitted into a medical college because of reservation quotas¹⁴, the anger of seeing a Sultan Owaisi get away with building violations that others are routinely penalized for, the frustrations of dealing with policemen who were incapable of even enforcing existing laws. Just as often, however, such material links were not evident, if they were there at all. I became interested far more in exploring sentiments which had no such apparently “logical” explanations to back them up – sentiments which always seemed to be on the verge of being labeled communal, fanatical or worse, which could not readily be redeemed by taking recourse to material explanations, and which (it seemed to me) relied heavily on the usually ignored discourses about belief, religion and faith.

three “feeling”

The second thing I could not have fully anticipated (and in fact was entirely unprepared for) was the sheer messiness of the debates, the wrenching entanglements of intellectual positionings, and the distress of not knowing how to say something of value and yet avoid being drawn into this unstoppable spin of dialogue. Vasanth Kannabiran, an

¹³ “Dharma means literally that which one lays hold of and which holds things together, the law, the norm, the rule of nature, action and life” (Sri Aurobindo *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press [1922] 1970) 22 *fn*1).

activist with Asmita in Hyderabad, perhaps helped me articulate this feeling when she said once, reflecting on her work over the years: “I think that somewhere we refined ourselves – in all our theory, and in all our talk – we refined ourselves *out of action*... there is a kind of total intellectual circularity of argument that goes on and on where we refine ourselves out of being able to speak.”¹⁵ Many months later in Delhi, my uncle and I were talking about just such trends in intellectual debate.

What do you do, he asked me, when you see that something can be true, and that the opposite can also be true?

He paused and looked straight at me, but I did not answer.

You sit quietly and allow yourself to feel, right?

I nodded, giving in to that part of my mind which seemed at once to find solace in such a solution, and ignoring the other part which was asking already what it might categorically mean to ‘feel.’ I had been asked to state my position or my opinion several times and in several contexts during the course of fieldwork, and had done so usually without much hesitation. But it was not perhaps until this moment in Delhi that I realized my relationship to this project could never be a distanced one, but needed fundamentally to be deeply personal. Were it not for my position as daughter within a middle-class Hindu household, I may never really have been able to gauge the extent to which faith (not necessarily ritual, but faith) structures daily life, and extends to structure also other things like political affiliation. To this extent, my work was already deeply personalized. But it seemed there was further to go. How was I to speak of such nebulous things as sensibilities and sentiments without knowing them myself? How was I to write about

¹⁴ *i.e.*, affirmative action policies.

¹⁵ Interview with Vasanth Kannabiran.

structures of feeling without myself *feeling*, or about structures of faith and belief without myself being a believer? Any other approach would at best have made use of the language of rights – the right to individual faith, belief, opinion, sentiment – viewing from the outside and effectively marginalizing that which seems to defy internal comprehension. I needed to face the circularity of intellectual debate not *just* as a researcher, endlessly picking through arguments and ideas strewn over wastelands, but as a person, an Indian, a Hindu, a daughter *and* a student-researcher, by picking through arguments to be sure, but in the end, like most others around me, also by *feeling*.

What did this mean for me and for fieldwork? It meant that when a gentleman who had been with the RSS for many years told me to visit the Qutb Minar complex in Delhi, to see the Quwwat-ul-Islam (“Might of Islam”) Masjid there that had been built with material collected from the ruins of twenty-seven Hindu temples, I suspended judgement, set aside all the intellectual objections that immediately came to mind, and went there one morning, deliberately not inviting company. It meant that when I visited the Chola temple at Gangaikondacholapuram on a trip to Trichy, and was told by a tour guide that stones from the walls had been used in colonial times to build a nearby dam, I understood this both as historical fact and as personal loss. When I learned that a great number of the stone statues and exquisite Chola bronzes housed in the shabby Tanjavur Museum of Art had once been buried by priests to prevent their theft or their destruction, it meant that I felt deep personal gratitude for the actions of those men hundreds of years ago.

Alongside these, however, were other reactions. One weekend, I went to visit a young uncle who lives with his family in a posh part of Hyderabad called Banjara Hills.

Standing on the terrace of his beautiful home, above the sparkling city that stretches for miles in every direction, Ravimama said to me, “you want to see communal harmony?” I looked at him quizzically. He pointed in three different directions: “look, a mosque there, a temple there, and there, a little further away, a church.” “There you have it,” he said. I smiled and turned around to examine the temple, which was closest to the house. To my surprise I found it had a set of loudspeakers mounted on top of a pole, directly beneath a triangular saffron flag. Noticing the direction of my gaze, Ravimama continued, “and in the morning and evenings, this fellow plays Anjaneya’s bhajans [devotional songs to Hanuman] for an entire hour. The mullah shouts from that direction, the songs blast from this direction, and we are in between. Communal harmony.” “I don’t even think the priest has a bath or does any pujas.” This was Radhika atha, my aunt. “He just comes there and turns on the switch everyday – except Sundays when he takes rest!” A few days after, I was sitting in the garden just as the sun was setting when the event commenced. First began the bhajans, loud and somewhat filmy. Then the low beseeching cries of the mullah. And as the sounds made the air loud with competing voices, words of prayer mixed in with proclamations of right to difference, a virtual cacophony of diversity seemed to rise like a spire into the sky, less a prayer to the Gods above than testimony to the intensity of the struggles below.

Then one night, many months later, watching a television program called the ‘Many cities of Delhi’ – on the art and building of the several Muslim dynasties that made Delhi their capital – I saw those around me stiffen and look for every opportunity to change the channel, though these same people watched with keen interest in weeks past similar documentaries on the temples at Hampi, at Konark, on the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi. I

suppose by then my first reaction was not anger, nor was it to see this stiffening as nothing less than a precursor to fanatical intolerance. But I did wonder if somewhere, somehow, we (in such average middle-class families at least) had not allowed intimate identifications with the icons, ideas, and expressions of Hinduism to become the markers of boundaries and not of expanses, and if we were not replacing an inherited broadness of perspective with a growing narrowness of spirit.

This would remain the tension in myself, as in my work: the desire on the one hand to understand the depth of feeling that underlies what we call ethnicism, and the dislike of its tendency towards narrowness. I was unwilling to see religion within ethnicist belief as being somehow 'fake,' to use its fake-ness as an excuse to dismiss. I was unwilling also to extrapolate from ethnicist reliance on some aspects of religion and see the threat of fundamentalisms lurking around every corner. But there was undeniably another aspect to faith within ethnicism, a narrowness that left me often wary, often doubtful, and destined to play the role of contrarian.

four fieldwork

Life outside and beyond the world of fieldwork then transformed fieldwork itself. For if the concepts, icons and practices of religion seemed naturally to pervade almost every other sphere of activity, in the space of the women's group they were conspicuous in their absence. Or, perhaps I should say more accurately, their presence was carefully monitored, and their spheres of influence circumscribed. In this sense perhaps, the women's group is a secular space like few others are or even try to be in the Indian context. On one level, this 'secularism' is the straightforward product of the feminist

movement's broadly Marxist ideological heritage (especially in places that are home to strong Leftist/ "people's" movements like Hyderabad) which rejected all association with religious faith as essentially irrelevant to the human needs of subsistence and survival. On another, it is a response to the challenges posed by several different 'events': most significantly, the increased frequency of communal riots; the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue and the demolition of the Babri Masjid itself by kar sevaks of the Sangh Parivar¹⁶; and a series of legal cases that brought into startling focus the problematic interface of gender and community. The first and most well-known of these cases was that of Mohammed Ahmed Khan v. Shahbano Begum, in which the divorced Muslim woman Shabano was awarded maintenance by the Supreme Court under a provision in the (secular) Code of Criminal Procedure, much to the chagrin of her husband and later the wider Muslim community, which sought the enforcement of existing provisions under Islamic law (as per the 1937 Shariat Act). The Muslim community's reaction received so much attention and precipitated such widespread debate on issue of the Uniform Civil Code that Shahbano eventually was forced to take sides and herself reject the judgement granting her maintenance, on the grounds that it violated Islamic law. The Tilhari "triple talaq" case of 1994, and the Sarla Mudgal case of 1995 would again produce judgements apparently favorable to women: in the former, Justice Tilhari ruled that unilateral "triple talaq" divorce permitted under Muslim Personal Law was unconstitutional because it was discriminatory towards women, and in the latter Justice Singh ruled that conversion to

¹⁶ Sangh Parivar literally means 'Family of Organizations,' though the term is commonly used to refer to the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and its affiliates, most famously including the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad). Kar Sevaks are party workers.

Islam as a means of justifying polygamy was a violation of the Hindu Marriage Act.¹⁷ And yet, in cases such as these the 'victory' of gender was undercut by the judiciary's often explicit critique of the treatment of women under Muslim law. As such, Madhu Kishwar's question about the Shahbano judgement could be said to apply to the other verdicts as well and summarize the issue: "Pro-women or Anti-Muslim?"¹⁸ The problem, from the point of view of women's groups, was not only one of gender, but equally one of minority rights in a predominantly Hindu State.

The response of women's groups to these new dilemmas was twofold: first, to mark themselves also as being predominantly Hindu (despite their own ideological distance from traditional religious belief), and second, to move towards forging a new feminist praxis no longer based solely on gender, but equally or perhaps even more now on considerations of minority rights. It bears pointing out that the specific (minority) rights in question here do not refer to subsistence or livelihood in any physical sense, but to distinct identity, self-expression, and to some extent also self-determination. In an increasingly polarized social and political atmosphere, the language of Marxism gave way to the language of liberalism, allowing religion into the secular space of the women's organization in the only way possible: as the *right* to distinct identity and self-expression. Religion, in this context, is not a worldview or a code that guides thought and action, but a *right* much like any other, a desacralized, private marker of difference

¹⁷ Less widely publicized than the Triple Talaq judgement was the fact that the Supreme Court stayed the Allahabad High Court's ruling very soon after, on August 3 1994. Still less known is a *fatwa* issued by a body of Muslim theologians against the efficacy of the triple talaq issued at a single sitting (This was followed, however, by a counter-move on the part of the Jamaat-Ulema-e-Hind upholding the validity of the triple talaq divorce).

¹⁸ Madhu Kishwar, "Pro-women or anti-Muslim? The furore over Muslim Personal Law" in *Manushi* 32 (1986)

and a means by which to preserve diversity. All the old assumptions about the essential irrationality of religious faith or its propagation of 'false consciousness' do not disappear, but recede into the background of a larger liberal rationality that operates now through the discourse of rights.

Perhaps I sensed the disjuncture between these two worlds in which I operated from the very beginning simply because the attitudes towards religious belief and faith were so markedly different in each. But it was not until many months after commencing fieldwork that I first began to understand this difference as deeply problematic. I had returned briefly to Hyderabad from Bangalore to attend a workshop organized by Anveshi on 'Translation,' and during one of the talks, there occurred a rather curious exchange between a speaker (a well-known Indian academic) and a student of his from a local university. I did not have my tape-recorder running, and so can only summarize and paraphrase from my notes of the meeting the conversation that took place. The speaker, while trying to emphasize the importance of historicizing ideas or understanding them as products of specific historical movements, stated also that such efforts might reveal, for example, the work of 19th century thinkers like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna among others to be devoid of much substance, their effect 'hallucinogenic'.¹⁹ 'To me they are vacuous' he said, shrugging. This was during the

¹⁹ Sri Ramakrishna (1834-86) was a Bengali saint, in whose name the Ramakrishna Mission (with branches now in most Indian cities) was founded. Many of the stories Sri Ramakrishna used to tell are still favorites among children. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and himself a mystic. He is best known in the West for his participation in the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, where he presented Hinduism as a major religion with considerable success. The speaker named others, grouping them as Orientalists: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, President of India and an esteemed writer on Indian philosophical traditions, Justice Krishna Iyer, and indeed also Sir William Jones.

question-answer period, so the student asked after a time what he meant by 'vacuous,' to which the speaker replied, shrugging again, and assuming for some reason that this student's vocabulary must be quite poor: '*Vacuous*. It means empty.' The student was apparently so flustered by the answer, or maybe by the manner in which it was delivered, that he tried hastily to explain himself but eventually moved on to another question.

For my part, I did not know how to respond either. The speaker's rough handling of his student aside, I could only think of the great reverence with which the names of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna are regarded in most Hindu homes, of the visions of a reformed society they inspired, and of the continuing importance of their ideas, evident from the work still being done in their names. It seemed to me that this speaker had, in the breadth of a single word, crossed over the invisible lines demarcating the private terrains of belief, and completely negated the value of one prominent strain of Hindu reformist philosophy by pronouncing its vacuity. Anybody who might allow their belief to be molded by Swami Vivekananda or Sri Ramakrishna would then be nothing less than misguided, for (the argument would go) when such philosophies are put into 'proper' historical perspective, they would surely amount to nothing. Such faith, from this point of view, could only be a form of false consciousness: 'hallucinogenic', as the speaker suggested.

If such a position was not entirely out of place at this gathering of activists and scholars, it would not, however, be fair to suppose by extension that the opinions it expressed were widely-shared. Still, it was evidence of a disjuncture between two radically opposed worldviews that, up until that point, I had not seen as *radically* opposed. I left Hyderabad

soon after the workshop concluded, and did not think of the incident itself except to wonder if any of us are really capable of putting our own *present* ideas and beliefs into 'proper' historical perspective without the luxuries of historical distance, allowing them to appear as ephemeral fictions instead of the 'truths' we hold them to be. What kind of exacting demand was this, and what purpose would it really serve? What if that history was not seen as the endless march of events through 'homogenous empty time' but as a past that lives still in and through the present? Perhaps because I continued to imagine how hurtful the speaker's comments might have been to someone who had a photograph of Swami Vivekananda or Sri Ramakrishna in their puja room, my own academic queries became also the vehicles of anger and distaste. And though I reminded myself, time and again, that not everyone in the Hyderabad activist/academic community would be so carelessly judgmental, the idea that religious faith was a kind of false consciousness seemed nevertheless intrinsic to most Indian academic perspectives. I was aware of the disjuncture between the two opposed worldviews, then, but was unsure, given my own personal responses, of how to address it theoretically.

five music

Oddly enough, when I did begin to comprehend the theoretical significance of this disjuncture, and its fundamental relevance to a study of ethnicism, it was because a chance occurrence altered the nature of my personal relationships in the field. Greatly energized by hearing Susie Tharu speak of her own personal involvement with the women's movement, I decided to shift the focus of my work slightly from specific discussions about the politics of secularism to the collection of personal histories as a means of contextualising activist approaches to religion and ethnicism. I found my way

eventually to cupboards of old papers and tape-recordings that documented the history of activist work in Hyderabad, and began spending most of my afternoons sorting through the yellowing stacks of papers in a corner of the Anveshi reading room. I was a familiar face by this time, but two things would cement friendships and then coincidentally enable me also to think about the problematic of belief anew: the first was food, and the second was music.

Tucked away in a corner of the Osmania University campus, an old staff-quarters building surrounded by a lush garden functions as Anveshi's office. Everyday, the staff and any other friends who happened to be around would spread a mat on the porch, open out several tiffin containers and proceed to share lunch. I was never excluded from this daily ritual, but the extreme guilt I felt at not contributing an item myself compelled me sometimes to disappear from Anveshi during lunchtime, and my actions became a matter for humor among the staff. Still unsure of my cooking skills, I decided one evening to try my hand at something simple. I bought a kilo of tomatoes, some onions, red chili powder, and methi (fenugreek) on the way home, and arrived the next morning at Anveshi with two bottles full of tomato thokku (a cooked chutney). The older woman there who tended Anveshi's garden – Sattamma – kept the bottles after lunch that day, saying “nee giftu (your gift [to us]).” My contributions became more regular after that, a dal or a curry, sometimes store-bought samosas. Sattamma, for her part, responded by bringing me a cup of tea or pointing me to the flask in the kitchen each time I came to Anveshi, making a little extra each time because, as she would tell others, “eeamma aduguthundi (this girl will always ask [for more]).” Relationships within the setting of the women's group were never formal, but food provided the necessary excuse to

participate in the social life of the organization. The real reason behind my presence, my research, became increasingly incidental.

And at some point during the hours of casual conversation over lunches, I learned that the librarian at Anveshi was taking Carnatic (South Indian classical) music lessons, and having some difficulty because of her teacher's particular style. I offered to help her learn the basics, since I had had some years of training. She hesitated, I insisted I was not looking to be paid, and then before I knew it I had a class going with her and some others every few nights. Word got around; people were talking of others who also sang and of how nice it would be to hear them again, and a gathering was planned for one evening at Anveshi, when we would drink cups of tea, eat onion pakodas endlessly, and sing. Several women (Anveshi members and activists) whom I had until then known only somewhat formally were there that evening. It happened after this that I often was asked to sing by visitors to Anveshi, and learned several songs myself from others around. "All this time you've been here doing this research," one of the activists remarked, "and we had no idea."

In part, this is a story of establishing rapport, of getting to that point in fieldwork when I could approach people for help without hesitation simply because I had established myself as a member of that community of friends. I spent a good amount of time feeling bewildered by the shifts that occurred, especially when friends would drop by my flat in Habshiguda to talk about work *and* to sing, and even more when a Telugu poet promised to write me a poem because, she said, holding my hand, she was so happy to have heard me. I suppose I knew right then that she might not ever get around to it – most Indians

make many promises they cannot hope to keep – but was touched just that, at that moment, she had felt like writing. But there was another cause for my bewilderment: to put it very simply, I had not expected that an art so rooted in classical Hindu culture would be appreciated in an environment normally deeply critical of just that kind of cultural background. In fact, the first time I sang at Anveshi, I deliberately picked three pieces which sounded more like folk-tunes since I thought these would be more accessible to listeners and were certainly less classically Hindu. None of these songs were Telugu, and since I was performing to a largely Andhra audience, it did not surprise me at first when I was asked for Telugu songs. But then someone asked if I knew Annamacharya and Tyagaraja-patalu, compositions which fit squarely within classical devotional traditions, even if they are sung in more lilting style for films and popular audiences. I attributed the request to language, the desire to hear something familiar, wondering briefly how other aspects of these songs would have been regarded, but thinking no more of the matter. Some days later, however, the question resurfaced when I happened to meet one of the women who wanted to hear Annamayya's kirtanas out on the Anveshi porch at tea-time.

"Do you know what the Shivalingam²⁰ is?" she asked me rather abruptly, as I walked into the porch from the reading room.

"Yes I think so..."

"It's a phallus, right?" and she proceeded to tell me about the fundamentally masculinist nature of Indian culture, her argument based essentially on the centrality of this phallic symbol.

"I would think it is a little more subtle than that..." I tried to interject, but to no avail.

A few minutes later when she requested a song, I – thoughtlessly – performed one I had recently been practicing, in praise of the deity Shiva himself. I apologized almost as soon as I was done, explaining that my choice of song was not intended to be a comment on what she had said earlier.

"No, no, that's okay" she replied, smiling. "Anyway what's the connection?"

six connections

To my mind, there were connections everywhere. Music was not just an art like any other, but an always-already sacred art. It was not just a mode of relaxation, to be enjoyed after a hard day's work, but equally a mode of worship. If I had implicitly understood this idea all along, my father-in-law articulated it for me several times during the course of my stay in India. "Take your music," he would exhort me, "and make that your offering." He would repeat the suggestion again, when he saw my interest in painting, and again with reference to my fieldwork and my dissertation itself. I realized then that his implicit separation of music-as-art and music-as-worship was for *my* benefit and certainly not a reflection of his belief: I am, after all, in the eyes of an older generation, a *modern* Indian woman, far better schooled in the arts of scientific rationality than in the arts of prayer, far more prone to be critical of the rationality of Faith than of the rationality of Reason. It was necessary, therefore, to tell me to *make* art a mode of devotion, to understand the secular as sacred, when for others like my father-in-law it was probably always-already so.

²⁰ The Shivalingam is perhaps the most common representation of Shiva, and is essentially a phallic symbol. He is also popularly represented as Nataraja, or Lord of Dance, or performer of the Tandava, the dance of destruction.

I realized then also that it was the logic of separating the sacred from the secular on which the position of the women's group turned. On one level, this separation enabled a camaraderie I had never expected to develop, a mutual appreciation and love for an art that gave us an excuse to meet, sit up late into the night playing *antyakshari*²¹, scribbling down the lyrics of songs that moved us or made us laugh, recording spontaneous compositions. Of all the different ways there might be to appreciate and enjoy an art, after all, this too was one. But if there was always something so wonderful about this enjoyment, something soothing about the a-political, a-religious fun of it all, there was always something else fundamentally out of place. That, however, I realized was *my private affair*.

seven private affairs

Really, then, the story of this dissertation has a rather unlikely beginning. It starts with a reluctant seven-year-old being made to sacrifice afternoon hours of play to sit with a strict and determined mother for several hours each day, singing notes she cannot decipher, with specific hand-motions she cannot understand. It starts also with the formal education of this same girl-child, then also just begun, which would encourage the scientific and the rational, the deeply skeptical, the sharply critical. And in these two beginnings is a fundamental paradox, an acute and apparently unresolvable contradiction between the irrational and the rational, between faith and its other. But none of this is clear just yet.

²¹ 'Antya' means last or final; 'akshara' is syllable. Antyakshari, therefore, is a game in which participants sing a song that begins with the last syllable of the song just completed by the opposing team.

The middle part of the story takes place at a boarding school in India, that happens to be located far from any urban center. I am now thirteen, maybe fourteen, I have been learning music for seven years. I am no child-prodigy, but music has its place now in my life: no longer am I the reluctant pupil. I wake up early, borrow a shruti-petti (a kind of voice box) from my teacher's house, and sit under the grand old Banyan tree where dance performances are held to complete the routine of early-morning voice exercises. I spend much spare time under this tree, or at some other secluded spot away from the main school buildings. I train myself not to feel self-conscious when villagers or teachers or other students happen by. My music teachers notice my interest and begin to give me special lessons, and very soon it is an accepted fact in school that Deepa can miss PT (physical training) or evening games for her music.

I learn music alongside Science and Maths, Social Studies and English. I choose it as a formal subject over Economics and Computers when I enter the ninth grade. And so my education continues. Some friends and I wear khadi (homespun cotton) clothes like the Gandhian activists we imagine ourselves to be. We give up wearing bottus on our foreheads, breaking our own rules of rebellion only to look more chic in saris for special occasions. We proclaim loudly our emerging politics, much to the angst and annoyance of our parents.

The turning point comes one afternoon, when a friend and I are being taught the Raga (scale) Amritavarshini, which means roughly 'rain like immortal nectar.' It is said that ragas can have powerful effects on the environments in which they are sung, and Amritavarshini, if handled well, is supposed to bring rain. Telling us tales of this raga,

and of how the song we are learning was composed to bring rain to a parched land, “look,” says MLV Akka – our teacher. it was custom in this school to refer to teachers as older sisters – pointing to the sky through the window. “you are singing Amritavarshini and so rain clouds are gathering!” She smiles at us playfully, and we respond with shy, happy grins. But we are intrigued. Back in the classroom, I report excitedly to another friend that we have been learning a beautiful song in the raga Amritavarshini, and that rain clouds started to gather while we were singing. Then, from behind me, comes a snigger. I turn around sharply. “What rubbish man,” says my classmate Sameer, brilliant in Maths, Physics, Computer Science. “It started raining because of the *Raga* is it?” My story becomes the joke of the evening.

The compulsion of the moment is to fight Sameer for reducing my excitement to foolishness, for forcing me to a choice, for his mockery of my desire to believe, but eventually I understand that the contest is within myself also: that, if I am to excel in this music that I so love, I must have faith, I must understand the notion of *bhakti* not just as a historical or theoretical concept, but from deep within. Without that, I may achieve a level of technical sophistication, I may even come to grasp the idea of *mano dharma sangeetam* or spontaneous composition, but my music will remain dry to the trained ear, devoid of the one element that gives it substance, vibrancy, life.²²

²² ‘Bhakti’ literally translated means devotion, but the word contains a history of a poetics of devotion that gives the concept its contemporary importance and indeed its present meaning. The concept appears in such central texts as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bhaagavata Purana*, defining a particular mode of worship – *bhakti-maarga* (the path of bhakti) or *bhakti yoga* – that emphasizes the emotional, the passionate and indeed also the ecstatic in devotional practice. Then from roughly the 9th through the 17th centuries, in a socio-economic landscape vastly changed by Muslim invasions (and the introduction of Urdu as court language), urbanization and the growth of the laboring classes, this ideology of bhakti finds expression in emerging vernacular traditions of music and poetry all over India.

And then I am aware of the contradiction between Reason as I have imbibed it through my education, and the faith at the core of the idea of *bhakti*. I have grown up with these opposites, these diametrically opposed modes of thought, and yet they did not fall into positions of opposition until now. this brief moment of mockery, when I am made to recognize the invisible dividing line that always was there between music and the rest of my subjects, indeed between music as *one formal* subject, and music as a medium of *bhakti*. The invisible dividing line forms itself in the playground-sand beneath my feet. hardens into stone with the carelessness of a classmate's derision, and I understand then its absolute irrevocability.

eight the thesis

from the Tamil Alvars and Vira-Saivas in the South to the Sants and itinerant saints of the North. The movement (loosely called) was in no small measure a response to entrenched social hierarchies and ritualized forms of worship. Writes Vijay Mishra: "the bhakti solution to the perennial question of representing the unrepresentable (Brahman) is to energize the idea of God with the language of emotion and passion and then personalize it" (*Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime* (New York: SUNY) 1998; 102). This emphasis, often on the kind of "surging emotion which chokes the speech, makes the tears flow and the hair thrill with pleasurable excitement," (J.N.Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass) [1920] 1967; 230) defined a mode of worship that would soon become an integral part of Hindu devotional practice. Even at the time of its writing, Tulsidas' *Ramacharitamans*, for instance, all but replaced Valmiki's *Ramayana* in popular traditions of temple singing (*satsangas*) to become the dominant narrative on the life of Rama in Northern India – a status which it retains to the present day. Further, if Hindu orthodoxy sought "to imbue secular life with the sannyasin's [ascetic's] ideal" (Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* trans. Richard Nice (Delhi: Oxford) 1989; 88), the bhakti tradition further charged this idea of *karmayoga* (devotion through work) with characteristic fervor, transforming its importance even within the bounds of classical Hinduism. Even as protest against prior modes of orthodox Hindu devotion, the bhakti religion was quickly incorporated into a transformed mainstream Hinduism. In contemporary practice, Bhakti is perhaps best understood as a complete immersion in something larger than oneself – or conversely as a faith in which even daily routines of work or the preparation of food can be transformed into mechanisms of worship.

The importance of these ideas in understanding the place of religion in Indian society and also in studying ethnicist ideologies will be explored further in Chapter Three and Four.

This dissertation is the product of these competing contexts of (postcolonial) modernity, or of contexts which come to compete, paradoxically, *only* in modernity. First, it is an attempt to problematize the logic by which academic discourse separates religion from the modern, the rational, the scientific, and regards it (at worst) as a fundamentally pre-modern affliction, or (at best) as an individual, private expression of identity. Second, it is an attempt to problematize the logic by which academic discourses separate religious ethnicism too, on the one hand from the modern, the rational, the scientific as a perversion of modernity (or a sickness within it), and on the other from religion itself, as “one of those pathologies that periodically afflict a faith.”²³ Not one or the other, but *both* these sets of assumptions are relevant to the present project, in no small measure because they share origins in post-Enlightenment rationality. But there is another reason, which brings me to the third and arguably consuming focus of this dissertation: the idea that religious belief and ethnicist belief are *not*, in fact, separable; that the one is organically related to the other. It is a bias of post-Enlightenment/liberal rationality that privileges individual, private expressions of belief over collective, public assertions, seeking thus to demarcate separate realms of ‘authentic’ religion and ‘inauthentic’ ethnicism. And since this bias informs most scholarship on ethnicism, I argue that it needs to be challenged.

Chapter one is concerned, then, with exploring the discursive constructions of ethnicism in Indian academic discourse in order to first, problematize understandings of ethnicism as perverse pathologies; and second, to draw attention to academic complicities in the production of ethnicist discourse. This chapter further seeks to pose the problem of

²³ Ashis Nandy, “The twilights of certitudes: secularism, Hindu nationalism, and

religion, faith and belief *within* the context of ethnicism and not apart from it, by suggesting that ethnicist belief is intimately tied to everyday practices of faith. The second chapter shifts to the specific ethnographic context of Hyderabad, and has two parts. The first follows the emergence and evolution of women's groups and feminist praxis in Hyderabad as a means of tracing also how the twin ideas of ethnicism and ethnicity come to structure the politics of women's activism, serving as funnels of sorts for feminist discourse itself. The second part of this chapter examines more specifically feminist engagements with the discourses of ethnicism, both of caste and of religion, suggesting that though Indian feminism may have the tools to understand the former, its own political stances leave much to be desired in its conceptualization of the latter. In fact, Indian feminism's own fundamental dependence on liberal-modern rationality enables it to pit the one against the other, effectively preventing any broader understanding of the 'culture of ethnicism' that unites these two opposed forms of self-assertion. By allying with the Dalit movement in opposition to Hindutva, Indian feminist-activist discourse further reproduces both liberal-modernity's tokenism vis-à-vis religion and its intolerance of ethnicism. The move forecloses the possibilities of activism rather than extending them.

It seems to me that, in the Indian context at least, religious ethnicism needs to be seen first and foremost as a challenge to those very regimes of liberalism and secular modernity that are the founding ideologies of Indian women's activism. In Chapter three, I explore elements of this critique, but not only or exclusively from a 'standard' ethnicist point of view. I rely here on none of the canonical texts that are said to delineate

ethnicist ideology (Golwalkar's *We, the nation defined* and Savarkar's *Hindutva*, for example), and I discuss none of the major issues that have featured in ethnicist political campaigns (the Babri Masjid issue, the UCC debates, and so on). Instead, I confine myself to lesser controversies, for the most part – that is, to events that became nationally controversial, no doubt, but for periods of brief intensity. My purpose here is twofold: to focus on issues that have not been entirely obscured in the usual fog of political debate and to focus on practitioners who are not readily identifiable as 'ethnicists.' This second aspect especially enables me to consider ethnicist belief as a point on a much wider continuum of meanings that extends, most importantly, to the everyday practice of religion. This chapter explores several (certainly not all) aspects of this continuum, with an eye to understanding how ethnicism's challenge to secular modernity grows almost directly from the pervasiveness of belief and its iconography in everyday life.

If Chapter three suggests that the rationality of religious belief can present a challenge (in this case in the form of ethnicism) to the regime of Reason in its liberal and secular incarnations, Chapter four is concerned with formulating the possibility of multiple Reasons. The persistent confusion over the meaning of 'secularism' that has besieged Indian social and political theory from times prior to Independence itself points to an unresolved (unresolvable?) tension between secular (a-religious) and religious rationalities. A portion of this chapter is devoted, then, to descriptions of this evolving confusion, first in the early stages of post-Independence social reform, and second in more contemporary political (and to some extent legal) contexts. A valued category of public life and a mark of distinction in the first phase, religion becomes a defining feature of increasingly politicized *ethnic* identities in the second, as it exceeds the spaces

demarcated for it by secular discourses of various kinds, *and* as it becomes a tool of politics. And yet, I will argue, ethnicism cannot be straightforwardly equated with religion for the simple reason that it does not reproduce *only* a religious rationality. Ethnicism does not speak only in the language or from within the frameworks of religious Reason, nor does it seek to replace the established secular order with an entirely new religious one. Quite the contrary, Hindu ethnicism is perhaps best understood as straddling the boundaries of Reasons, translating from the one into the other and back, mining religion itself for an imagination of a new spiritualized secular order.²⁴ The Chapter concludes with an examination of some aspects of this imagination.

This imagination, however, is yet in its infancy. The force of ethnicism remains still the force of its critique. But here the phantom threats of fascism and fundamentalism crowd academic analysis, pre-empting even a preliminary recognition of the *fact* of critique. It is the object of this dissertation to move, first and foremost, towards just such a recognition. The rest will have to wait until such time as the critiques of ethnicism

²⁴ A word about spirituality: There are many in India who draw a distinction between 'religion' as ritualized, particularized and potentially sectarian, and 'spirituality' as something far broader, unconcerned with ritual and ceremony, seeking Divinity from within. I have tended not to use the word 'spirituality' in the course of this work for two important reasons: first, as my own rather shabby definition indicates itself, there is a particular difficulty in trying to explain what it is without transforming it – and secularizing it – into yet another superficial description of the 'unity in diversity' idea. As I have understood the concept in its Indian usage, 'spirituality' does not mean that all religions are essentially the same, though it does seek out common proclivities. Then the problem of definition is also the problem of translation: 'spirituality' in Western contexts tends to be something associated with everything from New-Age thought to Aromatherapy and alternative medicine; even Oprah has a brief semi-religious segment at the end of each show dedicated to the "spirit." Rather than battle my way through this crowd of meanings, I have chosen to stick with the word 'religion,' for at the very least, it does not have the same associations of superficiality. My use of the concept of the 'spiritual' follows ethnicist usage, and is usually to make reference to a Seeking that is broader than that defined by the ritual and the dogma of any particular faith.

develop and evolve – or until they undo their own utility, or more likely outlive it, and are forced to disappear.

CHAPTER ONE

**“TILL I BLISTER AND ROAST...”
RETHINKING THE DISCOURSES OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN INDIA**

one

Yes, I know all that. I should be modern.
Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.
Touch Africa. Go to the movies.

Impale a six-inch spider
under a lens. Join the Test-
ban, or become The Outsider.

Or pay to shake my fist
(or whatever-you-call-it) at a psychoanalyst.
And when I burn

I should smile, dry-eyed
And nurse martinis like the Marginal Man
But, sorry, I cannot unlearn

conventions of despair.
They have their pride.
I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my hindu mind:
must translate and turn
till I blister and roast...¹

I begin, inevitably, with a catalogue of coeval oppositions: modernity/tradition;
modernity/religion. Science/superstition; rationality/fallacy-faith-belief;
modern/primitive; intellect/emotion; analytic/affective. Liberal/fundamentalist-fascist;
secular/communal: tolerant/intolerant. There are others, to be sure, other alignments,
other oppositions, each one bleeding into the next to varying degrees and with greater or
lesser structural impact. I introduce these oppositions here at the very outset so that all

¹ A.K. Ramanujan, “Conventions of Despair” in *The Striders* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966) 32-3. Dipesh Chakrabarty also quotes these stanzas at the beginning of his essay “Radical Histories and Enlightenment Rationalism” (*Economic and Political Weekly* April 8 1995, 751-9) which I will make reference to a little later on.

that follows in this paper is put into relative perspective by their presence on the table – so that it becomes difficult to understand a concept like “fundamentalism.” for example, as an independent unfettered entity that can exist apart from the oppositions that form it, the conditions that nurture it, the historical trajectories in which it properly belongs.

two

But oppositions and their genealogies are not by themselves the preoccupation of this paper. They are one of several overlapping themes that will surface periodically in this essay, which is in the end about modernity and the search for a language to talk about a phenomenon loosely called ‘Hindu nationalism.’² Academic as well as more public descriptions of ‘Hindu nationalism’ in India have been dominated by such words as ‘medievalism,’ ‘fundamentalism,’ ‘fascism,’ ‘fanaticism’ and of course ‘communalism.’ My own preference is for the term ‘ethnicism,’ though I am fully aware that it is a word *not* often used in the Indian context.³ I look to the idea of ethnicism first to avoid *some* of the harshness and historical particularity of words like ‘fundamentalism’ or ‘fascism,’ and then to move away for the moment from the familiar frames of discourse established by that most common of signifiers, communalism. For my purposes, however, the notion of ethnicism and the very foreignness of the word to the Indian context is an aide rather than the blue-print of a model into which specific Indian realities may or may not ‘fit.’ I

² It is not without a sense of irony that I even use the phrase ‘Hindu nationalism,’ as it is borrowed almost directly from the language of Western journalism. The BBC, CNN, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* all use the description to refer mainly to the BJP (“the Hindu nationalist BJP”), and the phrase usually carries only the veneer of journalistic objectivity. I use “Hindu nationalism” here to refer to social processes and movements wider than the political life of the BJP, but also because it is – at least on the surface – an objective category.

³ There are exceptions, of course, an important one being Stanley Tambiah’s *Levelling Crowds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), which places most South Asian conflicts in an “ethnonationalist” framework.

am not setting out to establish the ethnicist credentials of Hindu nationalism, but rather to use ethnicism as a mechanism of discursive distancing, a standpoint, a place from which to speak, and from which to consider the dominant phraseology of (academic and popular) critique. I distance myself, in other words, from such terms as fascism, fundamentalism, and communalism in fact to then go back to them.

There are two main ways in which I hope to effect this distanced return: one, by considering how and with what effect discourses of liberal modernity produce narratives of extremism and two, by considering the implications of using concepts and models based on these narratives to critically describe Indian realities. I will explain these aims further in a moment, but not without noting first that ethnicism too is a distinctly *modern* concept, describing distinctly *modern* phenomena, and can become a narrative of extremism in its own right. It appears to me a more general term, however, concretized by the attribution of characteristics and tendencies, but without the singular historical specificity of other like-concepts in the field. Even so, its usefulness as a tool of distancing is undercut somewhat by its origins within the discourses of modernity. So the position it demarcates I can occupy only tenuously, aware always that I must be prepared to interrogate the ground on which I have chosen to stand.

‘Ethnicism’ draws attention to the fact that there are similarities between what is happening in India and other movements and conflicts elsewhere in the world. As such the concept places Hindu nationalism and ‘communalism’ in the more global context of *modernity*, where – the story goes – regimes of capitalism and commodification increasingly drive people to “take refuge in cultural havens that are as far apart from one

another as they were at the origins of modernity – even though they may be watching the same TV shows.”⁴ So it would seem we are dealing with a conception of ethnicism as the inexplicable cultural “other” of modernity, an opposition with all that is liberal, secular and modern on one end, and all that is ethnicist (or worse) on the other.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the ideologues of the Sangh Parivar produce ‘Hindu nationalist’ discourse. Books, manuscripts, tape-recorded speeches, and countless other catalogues of words and deeds are offered as proof that they are indeed the originators of elaborate ideologies of exclusion and intolerance – ideologies which critics and analysts then name in decidedly non-neutral terms, as fascist, fundamentalist, communalist. But what are the implications of constructing ethnicism thus, as the dark underside of modernity, as a most dangerous *threat* to all that is liberal, secular, progressive and good in the world? What are the implications of allowing ‘ethnicism’ thus to slip into ever-deepening shades of extremism, until it is almost irretrievably synonymous with fascism? What is said to be at stake, and for whom? In an effort to address these questions, I will argue that the narratives of ethnicism and extremism are constituted not only from within – by the ideologues of the Sangh Parivar – but also from without, paradoxically by the very liberal/modern discourses that are so troubled by the growth and popularity of these phenomena.⁵

My discussion of the narratives of extremism used to describe (and critique) ‘Hindu nationalism’ will not begin with the Indian concept of ‘communalism,’ as I want to preserve a sense of the global context in which these narratives operate. Here I take my

⁴Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third world criticism in the age of global capitalism” in *Critical Inquiry* 20/2 (1994) 353.

cue from Richard Fox, who points out that ‘communalism’ as defined in Indian academic discourse makes it appear to be a “failure specific to India,” with the only ‘outside’ force admitted occasionally being that of colonialism.⁶ He quotes Paul Gilroy: “There is scant sense ... that the universality and rationality of Enlightened Europe and America were used to sustain and relocate rather than eradicate an order of racial difference inherited from the pre-modern era ... it is hardly surprising if it is perceived to be relevant at all, that the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks [just as communalism refers to Hindus and Muslims – RGF]. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West.”⁷ But while Fox then proceeds to compare Welsh ethnic nationalism and Sikh communalism “to establish that a similar pattern underlies these cases” indicating the specific weaknesses of modernity, I hope to use his starting point to address a substantially different set of questions.

While it is true that all prevailing theories about ‘communalism’ treat it as a uniquely Indian phenomenon (a pathology of nationalism, a creation of colonialism, a sickness of Indian modernity), they frequently do so by drawing it into distinctly non-Indian historical trajectories – so that these days we speak of the fundamentalism of the Sangh Parivar in India, the fundamentalism of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the

⁵ cf. Susan Harding, “Representing fundamentalism: the problem of the repugnant cultural other” in *Social Research*, 58/2 (1991) 373-93.

⁶ Richard Fox, “Communalism and Modernity” in *Contesting the Nation: Religion Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1996) 237. Talal Asad makes a similar point, albeit in a different context: “Non-westerners,” he writes, who seek to understand their local histories must also enquire into Europe’s past, because it is through the latter that universal history has been constructed. That history defines the former as merely “local” – that is, as histories with limits...” (*Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1993) 200). I will return to these arguments a little later on in the paper.

fundamentalism of Christians in the United States all in one breath. My point here is not so much that the concept of fundamentalism should be properly Indianized so that different strains of the idea may be better understood and better tackled. Nor am I questioning the usefulness of non-Indian concepts in general to describe Indian realities. But what does it mean to attempt an understanding of a 'specifically Indian' problem from within the framework of – for instance – an equally specific German history of seventy years ago? What does it mean to juxtapose these two entirely different histories, treat them as though they were 'one' in the name of learning the lessons of history? Or, more broadly, what are the implications of seeking out foreign events as lenses to then look back at ourselves, to then produce Indian histories and theories about the Indian present?

The importance of these questions becomes clear when we notice how casually words like 'fascism' and 'fundamentalism' are used in ordinary conversation, in letters sent in to newspapers, even in Op-Ed pieces and semi-academic writings. Here, the words tend to be used in much the same way Indian youth sport 'Malcolm X' T-shirts on one day and 'Calvin Klein' on the next: with an air of ease that is never entirely aware of the weight of this symbolism in its native context, and never entirely ignorant of the existence of some symbolic meaning. Many Indians have a pre-packaged understanding of all that is happening in India, the parameters of which are all drawn unproblematically from non-Indian contexts. For the moment at least, I am refusing the cynical position that says there is no other alternative, preferring to focus on the many acts of translation, elision

⁷ Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* quoted in Fox 1996:240 (sic).

and evasion that come with pre-packaged understandings, and preferring to insist on the need for another kind of language.

three definitions

- ethnic** 1. Pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish; Gentile, heathen, pagan ...
 2.a. Pertaining to race; peculiar to a race or nation; ethnological. Also, pertaining to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics, esp. designating a racial or other group within a larger system; hence (*U.S. colloq.*) foreign, exotic ...
 b. *ethnic minority (group)*, a group of people differentiated from the rest of the community by racial origins or cultural background, and usu. claiming or enjoying official recognition of their group identity.
- ethnicism** a. Heathenism, paganism; heathenish superstition; and instance of this (*obs.*).
 b. In mod. use without reproachful implication: The religions of the Gentile nations of antiquity; the common characteristics of these as contrasted with Hebraism and Christianity
- ethnicity** 1. Heathendom, heathen superstition. *Obs. rare.*
 2. Ethnic character or peculiarity...⁸

Writing the introduction to a volume of essays in 1975, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P.

Moynihan note that “ethnicity” seems to be a new term, for it makes its first appearance in English language dictionaries only in the early 1970s. “One senses,” the authors write, cursorily surveying the available definitions, “a term still on the move.”⁹ Some twenty-five years later, with living memories of a world before the independent nation-state receding into the pages of history books, our understandings of groups, group relations and group conflicts are dominated by notions of ethnicity. At the base of much violent

⁸ Quoted from *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989).

⁹ Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, “Introduction” in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1975) 1.

conflict in the world today there are said to be deep fissures separating people from people, and all along the lines of ethnicity. To be sure, the word still carries its more benign associations – ethnic food, ethnic clothing, ethnic hairstyles and more, all superficial markers of cultural difference – but the more ominous associations of “ethnic cleansing,” atrocities committed on “ethnic minorities,” and “ethnocide” or even genocide predominate. One hardly can think of ethnicity without giving a thought to the growing list of violent clashes around the world, or to the images of mass killings and suffering exiles that appear a constant and chilling feature of television broadcasts and newspaper reports.

What features are said to constitute ethnic identity? Ethnicity refers first and foremost to *group* identity: “the organization of plural persons into distinctive groups ... of solidarity and the loyalties of individual members to such groups.”¹⁰ The *distinctiveness* of the group is usually given by a common language, skin color, culture, religion, territorial occupation or some combination of these attributes, which become the *naturalized* possessions of the group, its *primordial* anchorage. “The central components in this description of identity,” writes Stanley Tambiah, “are emotively charged ideas of inheritance, ancestry and descent, place or territory of origin, and the sharing of kinship ... made realistic and imaginable by mytho-historical charters.”¹¹ Ethnic identity begins then to “crystallize” around specific mytho-historical (but nonetheless contemporary) cultural symbols.¹² The process necessarily involves a smoothing over of internal cultural differences: “internal unity and homogeneity, and external difference and

¹⁰ Talcott Parsons, “Some theoretical considerations on the nature and trends of change of ethnicity” in Glazer and Moynihan 1975:53.

¹¹ Tambiah 1996:20-1.

opposition are integral to this condition.”¹³ The emphasis on group boundaries does not, however, imply that these are permanently unchanging: Horowitz notes that ethnic identity seems to expand (assimilate) and contract (differentiate) to “fill the political space available for its expression.”¹⁴ Ethnicity is motivated, then, not merely by claims of primordiality and distinctiveness, but equally by “the pragmatics of calculated choice and opportunism.”¹⁵

The constitutive elements of ethnic identity were already becoming apparent to those contributing to the volume on *Ethnicity* in 1975. Alongside intellectual analysis in these essays, however, there is occasionally a whiff of perplexity: “primordial” identities were supposed to fade in importance in the modern world, and as part of the processes of modernization, so why was ethnicity now in even greater ascendance? Milton Gordon wrote then of “liberal expectancy,” or the idea that the sharp edges of ‘ethnic’ identity in the United States would eventually dull, with the “raising of the competitive resources ... by the corrective means of government aid programs.”¹⁶ “*Interest*,” Glazer and Moynihan added, was to have “guide[d] rational men – or drive[n] them – in social

¹² Donald Horowitz “Ethnic Identity” in Glazer and Moynihan, eds., 1975:120.

¹³ Tambiah 1996:21.

¹⁴ Horowitz 1975:137; see also Donald Horowitz *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1985) 64-74.

¹⁵ Tambiah 1996:21. It should be noted that conceptions of ethnic groups as primordial and as opportunistic ‘interest groups’ are competing models in the literature on the subject. Barth, for example, emphasizes more the processes of boundary formation and maintenance (see his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*, ed. Frederick Barth (Boston: Little Brown 1969) 9-37). I do not, however, see these models as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary: ethnic groups can and do often rely on their own *constructed ideas of primordiality* in order to emphasize group coherence, and so function more effectively as an interest/lobby group. The imputation of primordiality and the belief in its logic is more important than the objective historical ‘truth’ of it, which cannot be unproblematically ascertained, in any case.

action.”¹⁷ In other words, *class* differences were to have overridden those of ethnicity. for surely achievement-driven class status offered more possibilities for emancipation than did the ascribed structures of ethnicity. Under these circumstances, “structural pluralism ... would [come to] exist *voluntarily*, as an *unofficial social reality in communal life*.”¹⁸ But none of this happened, of course: not only did what Gordon called “structural separatism” intensify, but new socio-political movements began to grow around ideas of cultural nationalism and ethnic power. Noting this largely unanticipated reality of the modern world, the essays in the volume proceed to record observations and theories of ethnicity, and analyze evidence from movements already flourishing all over the world.

If contributors to this volume had already accepted in 1975 the idea that, contrary to their expectations, ethnicity was a force to be reckoned with, the same was not true of the Indian intelligentsia. In spite of having lived through the terrible realities of Partition, and in spite of bearing witness to several local movements that resulted in the creation of linguistic states in 1956, “ethnicity,” was not regarded as a crucial object of intellectual or activist interest – at least not one that had significant implications in the Indian context. It would take until the mid-1980s for this to happen in India, when the public uproar over the case of Mohammed Ahmed Khan vs. Shahbano Begum suddenly made religion an insoluble marker of ethnicity, and then again until the early 1990s, when what came to be known as the “Mandal” agitations made caste also such an insoluble and irrefutable

¹⁶ Milton Gordon, “Toward a general theory of racial and ethnic group relations” in Glazer and Moynihan 1975:86.

¹⁷ Glazer and Moynihan 1975:7 (sic).

¹⁸ Gordon 1975:106; emphasis added.

marker of identity.¹⁹ I note the sense of perplexity in earlier Western writings on ethnicity because at both junctures in India, in the mid-eighties and the early nineties, most Indian intellectuals met the social upheavals of the times with a similar (perhaps even more pronounced) sense of bewilderment. There was a madness that seemed to have descended into the subcontinent, and its name was ethnicism.

But in India too, the sense of bewilderment would pass. Activists in the women's movement often look back at the early days of agitations against 'patriarchy' with a sense of 'amazement at the innocence of the period.' The ultimate success of the Indian women's movement, they say now, lies in the fact that it often provided the context for the emergence of other social movements – of caste, of religion, of sexuality – that it gave 'erstwhile suppressed identities' their long-overdue pride of place within the context of struggle.²⁰ I will have more to say elsewhere about the ways in which the Indian women's movement re-fashioned itself in order to come to terms with issues of religion and caste, but for now I want only to note that here, as elsewhere, the idea of ethnicity has been thoroughly incorporated into the politics of activism; in fact, that activism structures itself now very much around the core idea of ethnicity.

"Ethnic groups," writes Tambiah, "seem to be intermediate between local kinship groupings ... and the nation as a maximal collectivity ... [E]specially marked in the

¹⁹ Is caste also an aspect of ethnicity? The question is debatable, to be sure, but then many Dalit groups in India today are increasingly constituting themselves as separate cultural (and sometimes religious) groups within and often even apart from Hindu society. Since contemporary definitions of ethnicity tend to emphasize cultural unity over common racial origins, caste groups may in this sense be considered akin to ethnic groups. Going by the broad trends of Dalit self-definition, then, I am considering caste *in its present form* a specific kind of ethnic collectivity.

modern context ... is the mounting awareness that ethnic affiliation and ethnic identity are overriding other social cleavages and superseding other bases of differentiation to become the master principle and the major identity for purposes of sociopolitical action ... [As] a basis for mobilization for political action, [ethnicity] has challenged and is challenging the primacy for such mobilization of social class on the one hand and the nation-state on the other."²¹ Far from invoking doubt and puzzlement, then, ethnicity is recognized now as the 'master principle for the purposes of sociopolitical action,' that challenges the primacy of both class and nation as originators of such action. The pressing question now is not so much *why* ethnicity (and not class) has emerged as this 'master principle,' but more *how* it "modifies, incorporates, or even replaces class conflict"; *how* it has "influenced the aims and activities of nation making and national integration, which were taken to be the principle tasks of the newly founded third world nation-states."²² Writers may continue to debate the relationship between modernity and ethnicism, to refine our notions of how the modern, shrinking, capitalist planet has in fact *produced* ethnicism – but ethnicism itself is recognized as a phenomenon that is here to stay, and is no more the object of academic puzzlement though it often still is the object of much humanitarian concern.

four

interpretations: ethnicism as pathology

There is a curious contradiction that emerges here, one which is usually hidden underneath the dark tales of violence and bloodshed that have come to be synonymous

²⁰ Susie Tharu of Anveshi in Hyderabad, speaking at the City University of New York, April 26 1999.

²¹ Tambiah 1996:21-2.

²² Tambiah 1996:22.

with most ethnic conflicts. Underneath the horror, or perhaps at the root of it, is an unresolvable conflict between ethnicity as a *legitimate right* under liberal democracy – a legitimate and in fact celebrated claim to distinct group identity – and ethnicity as the ‘master principle’ of sociopolitical mobilization that can and often does challenge the very regimes of liberalism and tolerance that allow for its expression. One clear indication of this contradiction is the tendency to urge tolerance (out of love for diversity) precisely at those moments when conflicts are threatening to erupt yet again. So “unity in diversity” becomes the state slogan in the decades following Partition, and “composite culture” the lament of an older generation that watches angry mobs fill familiar streets, attacking cherished landmarks of childhood and memory. The use of such rhetoric is to my mind a manner of reminding those proponents of ethnic identity that *diversity* is what is at stake, indeed that it is in the context of diversity alone that ethnic assertions may honorably co-exist, and that taken out of this context ethnicity becomes a serious threat to the liberal faiths which give it – and us – a most essential kind of nourishment. If slogans like “unity in diversity” appear clichéd, however, it is only partly because they are slogans and therefore over-used. Efforts to return to a time when culture was “composite” inevitably emphasize only superficial levels of difference and diversity: grand varieties of ethnic food, clothing and religious practices. As part of the same effort, Hindus are invited to Iftar parties in the month of Ramzan, and Muslims receive sweets from Hindu neighbors at Diwali.²³ Such token gestures (well-intentioned though

²³ During the month of Ramzan, Muslims break their day-long fasts at the first sighting of the moon – a point which roughly coincides with sunset, and is known as “iftar.” There are certain foods eaten after this time: dates, grapes, haleem (a preparation of ground meat, wheat and spices), and dahi vadas (fried lentil patties soaked in curd). On certain Fridays during the month, parties are thrown to break the fast, and Hindus are often invited to partake of this meal. Diwali (or Deepavali as it is known in the South) is the “festival of lights,” that

they may be) and the longing they express do not in the end either understand or adequately respond to the substance of ethnicism. For if ethnicism is indeed a challenge to the prevailing regimes of liberalism and tolerance, it surely cannot be assuaged by merely the communal sharing of Iftar parties and Diwali celebrations. Yet, I am suggesting, such calls for celebration of ethnic difference in the face of even violent ethnicist conflict actually place legitimate claims to ethnic identity and outright ethnicism on opposite ends of the *same* spectrum: loud protestations of ethnicism are not unrelated to equally loud exaltations of ethnic difference. Ethnic conflicts become paradoxically the very picture of diversity gone awry, of identities exceeding their boundaries to set up hierarchies where there should be only an equality of all differences. Strident assertions of ethnicity are read, then, as pathologies, perversions, sicknesses, by their very nature antithetical, and so also threatening to that core ideal of liberalism: toleration.

Ethnicism has, of course, been diagnosed as a pathology before, albeit from different perspectives and with different implications. In the Indian context, Bipan Chandra²⁴ and Partha Chatterjee²⁵ regard ethnicism as a specific contortion produced by Indian nationalism, as part of the *natural* growth and development of the nation-state idea. Chatterjee, for example, suggests that the “historical imagining in the nineteenth century of ‘India’ as a nation” is itself a distortion for it is based on a politics of exclusion.²⁶ His arguments directly link *Hindu* nationalism with 19th century *Indian* nationalism: the idea

marks the mythical king Rama’s return to Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile. Diwali is celebrated by buying new clothes, distributing sweets, lighting oil lamps all around the house, and of course burning fire-crackers.

²⁴ Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (New Delhi: Vikas 1984)

²⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: a derivative discourse?* (London: Zed Books 1986); and “History and the Nationalization of Hinduism” in *Social Research* 59/1 (1992) 111-49.

of “nationness,” says Chatterjee, has always been exclusively (or at least predominantly) Hindu, beginning with 19th century nationalist rhetoric and continuing into contemporary Hindu extremist discourse. Ethnicism, in this view, is *inherently* a process of exclusion and distortion carried out in the name of nationalism, and in service of modernity. Ashis Nandy²⁷, in contrast, sees ethnicism somewhat more broadly as a particular distortion of Indian modernity. Writes Nandy: “If [a traditional] religious way of life cannot find normal play in public life, it finds *distorted expression* in fundamentalism, revivalism, and xenophobia.”²⁸ The suggestion here seems to be that modernity can incorporate religious faith into itself, but only in severely distorted form. Ethnicism is an embodiment of this distortion. As Nandy says, “Hindutva is one of those pathologies that periodically afflict a faith.”²⁹ Further, as ethnic violence becomes “more impersonal, organized, rational and calculative, it [comes] to represent ... a pathology of rationality” – or perhaps, to borrow an idea from Richard Fox, *hyper-rationality* – rationality

²⁶ Chatterjee 1992:112.

²⁷ Ashis Nandy, “The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance” in *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, ed. Veena Das (New Delhi: Oxford 1990) 69-93; and “The twilights of certitudes: secularism, Hindu nationalism, and other masks of deculturation” in *Postcolonial Studies* 1/3 (1998) 283-98.

²⁸ Nandy 1998:291 (my italics) and 295. T.N. Madan, a theorist who has written widely on religion in India, echoes many of Nandy’s views: “It is important to recognize that one of the major reasons for the rise of religious fundamentalism all over the world today is the excesses of ideological secularism and its emergence as dogma ... By subverting religion as generally understood, secularism sets off a reaction in the form of fundamentalism, which usually is a *perversion of religion*, and has less to do with the purity of faith and more with the acquisition of political power” (*Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford 1995) 260-1, my italics). The Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar too seems to favor such interpretations, although for him ethnicism is clearly a phenomenon to be understood (and treated?) as a *psychological* pathology of modernity: a “narcissism” that has itself become “deviant” (a “miscarriage of narcissism”) and a dangerous “stoking of persecutory fantasies” through which “feelings of absolute helplessness” are transformed into “group aggression, which takes on, overtly and covertly, the flavor of narcissistic rage” (*Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, religion and conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996) 167-8).

overdone. rationality gone awry. Even as a “modernist creed.” then. ethnicism is academically understood only as a distortion, an aberration. and a pathology of modern India.³⁰

What is said to be at stake in such academic depictions of ethnicism? Going only by Chatterjee’s and Nandy’s arguments (I will explore others in the next section), ethnicism in Indian intellectual discourse once again appears first as a threat to diversity: in Chatterjee’s view because it is already synonymous with Hindu nationalism and exclusionary politics. and in Nandy’s view because it promotes an increasingly homogenized “packaged version of faith.”³¹ In a panel discussion on “Secularism” held in Hyderabad last year, Gautam Bhadra (a ‘subalternist’) spoke of attending private schools in Bengal, where Saraswati puja was celebrated, and inviting the envy of students from government schools where the policy of secularism as equidistance from all religions prevented religious festivity of any kind. “There secularism is an oppressive thing.” Bhadra concluded, “to me it is a celebration.”³² Difference and diversity lie at the core of what ethnicist movements threaten to supercede, and even eliminate. This is not to say that academic discourse. like its popular counterpart, generally resorts to platitudes about the great value of cultural diversity, the need to respect other traditions and so on. In one sense, these aspects are in fact taken for granted, and understood as the starting points of a much larger problem on how then – given the ‘fact’ of difference – to incorporate an array of unequal ethnic identities and claims to group rights into non-

²⁹ Nandy 1998:295.

³⁰ Nandy 1998:283.

³¹ Nandy 1998:291.

western democracy.³³ Yet I believe that assumptions about the need for and importance of diversity that underlie contemporary Indian debates on minority rights and multiculturalism need to be spelled out for the light they shed on academic treatments of ethnicism. The point bears re-stating in the Indian context, for it is often assumed that diversity is somehow *natural* to India, more so even than to other countries of the world, and that it is to this *natural* diversity Indians must look if we are to find truly creative solutions to our current problems with ethnicism. Partha Chatterjee has described nationalism and the post-colonial nation-state as inherently given to homogenizing: not just imposing a packaged Hinduism on India's minorities, but also violently disrupting the "many possibilities of authentic, creative, and plural development of social identities."³⁴ Ashis Nandy tells us that the true source of religious tolerance in India lies in *everyday* religion, the traditional practice of religion as *faith*, with all its malleability, variety, and richness, and not in the monolithic, imperious Hindutva.³⁵ Vast arrays of difference – of language, cuisine, culture, religion, custom, modes of activism, political practice and more – do indeed play a role in defining the unique character of India. But surely the view of this diversity as "natural," the space from which subaltern identity may creatively assert itself, the true locus of faith and traditions of co-existence and tolerance, is a view from the outside: the view of modernity itself. The deployment of "diversity" as a tool with which to demarcate an area of culture that is 'non/pre-modern' is equally a

³² Gautam Bhadra, at a "Panel Discussion on Secularism" organized by ANVESH at Telugu University, Hyderabad; July 12 1998 (Saraswati puja is essentially a ceremony invoking Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge and learning).

³³ See for example, Partha Chatterjee, "Secularism and Toleration" in *Economic and Political Weekly* July 9 1994 [1994a], 1768-77.

³⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1994b) 156.

³⁵ Nandy 1990:91; 1998:294.

deployment of modernity. To say this another way, “diversity” is a creation of the modern world, with little meaning or value apart from such homogenizing, hegemonic forces as colonialism, capitalism, globalization, even nationalism and of course ethnicism. Consider then Partha Chatterjee’s suggestion that one way to accommodate minority rights in modern democracy by drawing on the strengths of indigenous cultural practices is to allow religious minority communities to function essentially as democratic institutions within the nation-state.³⁶ “In spite of discussion about the fuzzy nature of boundaries in pre-modern India,” writes Sara Joseph in response to Chatterjee’s idea, there is still a tendency to “work with a model of communities as bounded entities. Partha Chatterjee could not have envisaged devolving serious political powers to communities if this were not the case.”³⁷ The only way to access non-modern ‘diversity,’ it would seem, is by dragging it fully into modernity, demarcating clear boundaries where once there was only ‘fuzziness,’ imposing representative democracy where once hierarchies thrived.³⁸

³⁶ Chatterjee 1994a:1775-6. Chatterjee presents the same argument in another essay entitled “Religious Minorities and the Secular State” in *Public Culture* 8/1 (1995) 11-40.

³⁷ Sara Joseph, “Politics of contemporary Indian communitarianism” in *Economic and Political Weekly* October 4 1997, 2522.

³⁸ Chatterjee sees his model of group rights as resolving (in the Indian context at least) an impasse in liberal political theory, generated by the question of how liberal democracy should deal with non-liberal minorities. Will Kymlicka has pointed to the model by which the Amish in the United States are allowed certain rights (for example educational exemption) in recognition of their social consensus in favor of group rights *over* the rights of individual members (“Two models of pluralism and tolerance” in David Heyd, ed., *Toleration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996) 79-105). It is just such a model that Chatterjee seeks to re-work, by insisting on *internal* democratic processes to protect the rights of individuals. But could not the introduction of democracy be seen as essentially superseding ‘traditional’ adjudicatory practices, thereby violating the right of the group to social consensus in favor of group rights? Would it not introduce the liberal freedom to question and revise religious belief, in direct contradiction to the rights of the group to limit individual liberties so as to “protect the constitutive ends and practices of the community” (Kymlicka 1996:97)? Chatterjee does admit in a footnote to searching only for “political

Problematizing the category of the modern does not mean that modernity is then escapable, certainly. What this means for Indian theories of ethnicism is that the culprit cannot ultimately be put away, for modernity also provides the only available model for managing the diversity it so treasures. A tension between the need to critique modernity, and the need to live and work within its formations endures therefore in Indian academic discourse.³⁹ But there is still in the end a convergence of popular and intellectual views on ethnicism: although their trajectories are substantially different, *both* views create a continuum that places diversity and celebrated ethnicity on one end, and ethnic violence/ethnicism on the other.⁴⁰ The only difference between popular and intellectual

possibilities within the domains of modern state institutions" (1994a:1776-7, fn3), but does not appear to see those very "political possibilities" as themselves modernizing (homogenizing) forces, that work *against* – not with or within – the group rights model.

³⁹ Gyanendra Pandey, speaking at the Anveshi-organized "Panel on Secularism" referred to above, in response to a somewhat indignant question from the audience asking why it is so necessary to critique the nation-state: "... we inhabit nation-states, we live in nation-states which we are going to inhabit for a very long time to come. We also quite clearly have gained from anti-imperial struggles, from the establishment of independent nation-states. Nobody is denying any of that. But the self-confidence of a well-established powerful national movement and resulting nation-state should precisely enable one to critique that nation-state. To critique modernity, and the kind of modernity that we have. What modernity are we fighting for? This is not to dispense with the modern ... Whatever investment one might have in the nation, with the pride that we do have in the very powerful national movement built up against imperialism and the establishment of independent nationhood, with very powerful struggles for the establishment of Indian modernity – a critique of all of those remains necessary part in the building up of the Modern, the Democratic, the Just Society, that have been the dreams of all of these movements. So it remains that while situated within the nation-state, which we live in, we don't have a choice, the critique of those is vital ... it is in fact an expression of self-confidence if you like." These are not issues often discussed (or really admitted for that matter), making it difficult for Indian writers (myself included) to recognize their voices too as distinctly *modern*. I will return to this idea a little later on in this paper.

⁴⁰ Richard Fox (1996) comes to a similar conclusion, although his approach is vastly different from my own. He argues that Western "nostalgia over community" (243) – formally theorized in the social philosophy of such "communitarians" as Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty – is a "flowering of utopian spirit" (241) that will eventually transform itself into full-blown ethnicism. Treatments of ethnic violence as but an anomaly or periodic aberration stem, in his view, from an inability to see utopian ideas of

reckonings lies in what *makes* the continuum: for the former it is *time* ('we *once* were a composite culture'), combined with all the unfortunate disruptions of history; and for the latter it is modernity. In both cases ethnicism is what happens when individual celebrations go too far; it is the refusal of one group (in this case Hindus) to recognize itself as *one* ethnic group among many others; it is as such the natural "other" of tolerance, diversity, and other such virtues of modern liberalism.

Of course, ethnicity is no more a "natural" entity than gender or race; in fact the discourse on ethnicism emphasizes the processes by which ethnic identity is meticulously molded and re-molded according to the needs of the time. But when its characteristics are listed, its tendencies and proclivities described, its purposes analyzed, ethnicism becomes a historical object. It comes as such to have an *objective existence* that is constituted, as Susan Harding writes, not just as its practitioners may please, but equally by "modern discursive practices, an apparatus of thought that presents itself in the form of popular "stereotypes," media "images," and academic "knowledge." Singly and together, modern voices represent fundamentalists and their beliefs as an historical object, a cultural "other," apart from, even antithetical to, "modernity," which emerges as the positive term in an escalating string of oppositions between supernatural belief and unbelief, literal and critical, backward and progressive, bigoted and tolerant."⁴¹ In India, such modern discursive practices as Harding speaks of meet to name the "nature" of ethnicism, and they do so most often by calling it an aberration and a kind of disease, one with specific symptoms, one that occurs *naturally* in India "as an outcome of the

communal living and violent ethnicism as *both* creations of the self-same logic of modernism.

⁴¹ Harding 1991:374.

subcontinent's specific constitution."⁴² So ethnicity is constituted from within no doubt, by its practitioners and its ideologues, but it is also constituted from without, by theorists, analysts and academics who frequently double as its critics. And the dual construction of ethnicity is mirrored by a dual process of *naturalization*: ethnicity is crafted from within by naturalizing the attributes of the group, and fixed from without by naturalizing its opposition to or distortion of liberal modernity.

five
interpretations: ethnicity as extremism

I might recall at this juncture Richard Fox's observation that most Indian theories of communalism treat it as a uniquely Indian phenomenon. "a failure specific to India," with the only external causal factor admitted being that of colonialism.⁴³ To Fox, and in contrast to the views of Chatterjee and Nandy outlined above, ethnicity is "not a pathology of modernity, it is an inherent infirmity or constitutional weakness in it" (237).⁴⁴ Understandings of communalism must in his view begin by "seeing it as a local terminus of a global web of relations spun out from Europe, and then by subjecting these relationships to a critical, historical analysis that ... makes them appear as the parochial representations of a hegemonic Western culture rather than the grand Truths of history and all humanity" (241). Fox thus calls for a move towards anti-orientalizing, undoing

⁴² Fox 1996:237.

⁴³ Fox 1996:237 (The page numbers in the rest of this paragraph refer to this same text).

⁴⁴ We might note in passing that Fox's views are in keeping with a Gramscian reading of ethno-nationalism. Aijaz Ahmed (quoting Gramsci) writes that the idea of the strong nation "rooted in imperial past and the religious institution is a pathological response in the face of a 'feared collapse,' with the hope that the 'ideological fanaticism' would 'patch up' structural weaknesses'" (in "Fascism and national culture: Reading Gramsci in the days of Hindutva" in *Social Scientist* March/April 1993, 49). Fox rejects the use of the word "pathology," but it seems to me that the notion of ethnicity-as-pathological response is nevertheless an intrinsic part of his argument.

the specificity of the link between communalism and India by attacking the Western myth that “Only India, after all, has vicious communalism” (241). While trying to make concrete connections between Eastern and Western ethnicisms, however, Fox seems to hold up India as a clear example of ‘the harm that will one day befall the West.’ In a rejoinder to the arguments of ‘communitarian’ social philosophy, he writes: “New Agers, creationists, and neo-conservatives wish to reenchant the West [with new-found love for community], but if they saw Indian communalism as proleptic rather than atavistic, they might recognize that only hyperenchantment is possible after disenchantment. They might see that nationalist chest-beating, multicultural stereotyping, sectarian soul-thumping, race-bashing and gender-plundering are the major new forms of enchanted community ... likely after modernity proves its weakness” (244). Fox’s insights on the “inherent infirmity or constitutional weakness” of modernity help produce more nuanced understandings of ethnicism, no doubt, but his next move – to learn valuable lessons from India’s current problems – helps also to construct Hindu nationalism as an extreme form of extremism itself. Indian communalism may no longer be a “failure specific to India” (237) but it is *the* failure of the modern world, to which not even a “troglodyte Nazism” (241) can compare. In taking such a position, Fox also comes perilously close to dismissing India, and other countries like it with ‘full-blown’ ethnicist movements, as lost causes. As a result of his anti-orientalizing efforts, extremism may appear closer to home than readers originally imagined, but the “horror” now is even more pronounced. And it is the horror born of the failure of modernity. In the absence of anything other than the mechanisms of modern (Indian) statecraft to “co-opt or repress sectarian communities,” and given “the failure of India’s bureaucratic rationality, of its capitalist productivity, of

its secular progress to overcome the hyperenchantment they also create” (249), there can be no other response to ethnicism except this horror, and no other way of understanding ethnicism in the modern context *except* as a discourse of extremism.

Quite apart from such discussions finding the underlying causes of ethnicism in the institutions and ideas of modernity, are entirely another set of Indian academic arguments that do in fact draw closer together the ethnicist histories of East and West. I am referring to a brief debate carried out in the pages of *Economic and Political Weekly* between 1993 and 1996, with many ‘spin-off’ articles since, evaluating what Sumit Sarkar then called the “Fascism of the Sangh Parivar.”⁴⁵ His title suggests, however, that this particular discussion is not about anti-orientalizing, or re-connecting communalism to the “ethical and intellectual heritage of the West.” On the contrary, Sarkar’s article and much of the ensuing debate is centered around *defining* fascism Indian-style: bringing the concept to bear on Indian realities; modifying it or rejecting certain aspects of it which do not ‘fit’ the Indian context; and looking through the crystal ball of fascism to see what the future might hold for India. These debates are explicitly about extremism, or more specifically ethnicism *as extremism*. As such, I would argue that they are less concerned with understanding ethnicism as a phenomenon than with naming it as a serious threat to Indian society, describing its imminence or its current (perhaps partial) manifestations, and invoking the need for political alignments to counter its forces. Although arguments such as those I have described above may lead us eventually to political positionings, this is not their sole or given aim, whereas the introduction of fascism into the discourse seems automatically to emphasize the need for opposition and

activism. All efforts at 'understanding' ethnicism then appear directed towards this single end.

The idea that fascism could emerge in India is in fact not a recent conjecture. Nehru is said to have remarked once that "Muslim communalism cannot dominate Indian society and introduce fascism. That only Hindu communalism can do."⁴⁶ But perhaps Nehru's comments and many such similar observations were not in the past taken very seriously, and were often delivered more for their rhetorical punch than to name a present danger. So Sumit Sarkar's article begins by noting that 'fascism' in the Indian context "had appeared till the other day a mere epithet, worn out by overmuch indiscriminate use, signifying little more than particular blatant acts of authoritarian repression or reactionary violence" (163). The event that was said to have changed this, making the threat of fascism frighteningly real, was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, and the series of riots that followed until January of 1993. Two main facts are offered as evidence in support of this claim. The Babri Masjid was razed to rubble in a matter of hours, a task which could never have been completed first without considerable planning, and second without the connivance of the authorities. In other words, the demolition was not a spontaneous act carried out by a raging crowd but a pre-meditated, deliberate undertaking in direct violation of a Supreme Court order. Neither did the police

⁴⁵ Sumit Sarkar, "The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar" in *Economic and Political Weekly* January 30 1993, 163-7.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sarkar 1993:163; further references are incorporated into the text. Here it is interesting to recall also that the British once regarded the Indian National Congress to be a fascist organization, and the Congress, in turn, leveled the same charge against Subash Chandra Bose, as much for his association with European fascists as for his differences with established Congress nationalism. Today of course it would be almost sacrilegious to speak of either Bose or the Congress nationalism in these terms — a shift well-worth remembering

intervene effectively, nor did the Union government (led then by Congress, with P.V.Narasimha Rao as Prime Minister) take adequate steps to prevent the actions of the 'Hindutva brigades.' Further, the riots that followed some weeks later in Bombay, where Muslims and Muslim localities were meticulously targeted, were said to have been engineered by Hindu politicians belonging to the Shiv Sena. Not only was the State ineffectual in preventing riots, but the State actually incited violence, and that with Muslims as its main target. The demolition and its aftermath, writes Sarkar, make the analogy with fascism clear: in Germany and Italy too fascism had "come to power through a combination of street violence (carefully orchestrated from above but still undeniably with great mass support), deep infiltration into the police, bureaucracy and army, and the connivance of 'centrist' political leaders. Crude violations of laws and constitutional norms consequently had alternated in Fascist and Nazi behavior with loud protestations of respect for legality..." (163).

Having established this basic analogy, Sarkar then proceeds to substantiate it with a series of lesser comparisons: in India the "classically Muslim target-area steadily expands" just as in Germany Hitler extended his antipathy beyond Jews and communists "to cover social-democrats, liberals, Catholics, [and] everyone who dared to think with any independence"; in India the Sangh Parivar made clever and efficient use of the latest audio-visual technology in their campaigns, just as in Germany Hitler "had also been a bit of a pioneer in these matters ... fully realizing the importance of spoken propaganda

in contemporary contexts. My thanks to Stever Tyler for reminding me of these other connections.

through the then relatively new techniques of the loudspeaker and radio” (163, 164).⁴⁷ There is also an economic analogy, one which likens economic re-structuring in fascist Italy to Narasimha Rao’s “wide-ranging changes in economic policy” in the early 1990s, a self-conscious movement away from Nehruvian socialism more popularly known as ‘liberalization.’⁴⁸ And finally there is the analogy of intellectual critique, which Sarkar inserts only as an “aside” in his article, but which is to my mind a crucial aspect of his intellectual-political positioning. Pointing to the “molecular permeation” of communal myths and assumptions into commonsensical ‘truths,’ Sarkar recalls once again the German parallel. He writes: “Fascist ideology in Europe had combined already quite widespread, crudely nationalist, racist, and in Germany anti-Semitic, prejudices with fragments from much more sophisticated philosophies. That it has owed something to a general turn-of-the-century move away from what were felt to be the sterile rigidities of Enlightenment rationalism is not a fact without some relevance today...” (164-5). The threat as far as India is concerned is not German Romanticism of course but perhaps a likeness of it: post-modernism. The core of Sarkar’s argument here may be reduced to two points: the unspoken assumption that Hindutva needs to be fought with every available weapon; and that “academic fashions” like post-modernism are dangerous because they “can reduce the resistance of intellectuals to the ideas of Hindutva” by “stimulat[ing] forms of indigenism not easy to distinguish from the standard Sangh

⁴⁷ It should be mentioned that in the early 1990s, the use of the media and audio-visual technology is hardly the kind of innovation that it may have been in Germany in the 1930s and 40s. The BJP did record and distribute with some efficiency audio cassettes of speeches given by its prominent members. Beyond this, its use of technology was nothing out of the ordinary. This aspect of Sarkar’s argument stands, then, on fairly shaky ground.

⁴⁸ Aijaz Ahmed has dealt in more detail than Sarkar with the links between ‘liberalization’ and the growth of fascism. See Ahmed 1993:32-68; and “In the Eye of the Storm: the Left chooses” in *Economic and Political Weekly* June 1 1996, 1329-43.

Parivar argument” (165). Post-modernism and the critiques of Enlightenment rationalism represent this constant threat of co-optation – the outcomes of which are obvious, going by the parallel histories of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.⁴⁹

It is perhaps worth noting that Sarkar names Gautam Bhadra and Dipesh Chakrabarty in this article as examples of “radical historians [led] down strange paths” (fn6) by the identification of subaltern assertions within Hindutva (by Bhadra), and for reconsidering the legacies of Enlightenment rationality from a historian’s perspective (by Chakrabarty). In a more sustained critique of trends in late *Subaltern Studies* again Sarkar names also Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy as ‘neo-traditionalist’ intellectuals for whom modernity is a convenient scapegoat on which to pin “all really dangerous or meaningful forms of power.”⁵⁰ Since “the Hindu Right [itself] often attacks the secular, liberal nation-state as a Western importation,” says Sarkar, such indigenist intellectual positionings “suggest affinities that are ... difficult to repudiate within the parameters of an anti-Enlightenment discourse grounded in community.”⁵¹ The dilemmas of occupying positions and taking stances ‘too close’ to those of the Sangh Parivar is not Sarkar’s alone, but one that is frequently mentioned by women activists, especially when dealing with issues of gender justice, the Uniform Civil Code, and pornography. Activists often complain that the space for secular discourse is being taken away by the participation of

⁴⁹ Once again see Ahmed 1993:51-5. K. Balagopal, the much-respected civil liberties activist from Andhra Pradesh, also has a similar argument. In an article entitled “Why did December 6 1992 happen?” (*Economic and Political Weekly* April 24 1993, 790-2), Balagopal writes that “it is now time to look at matters objectively, however dubious that task may seem to the subaltern theorists and postmodernists whose current preponderance among the progressive intelligentsia is one reason ... for the latter’s hopelessly inadequate response to the bulldozing of Hindutva” (790).

⁵⁰ Sumit Sarkar, “The decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*” in *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1998) 101.

the ‘Hindu Right’ in debates on women’s issues, and the suggestion is that all efforts must be made to break apart this unholy alliance. But these issues are far less easily resolved for Indian feminists than they are for Sarkar, who seems to call for a rejection – or at the very least an avoidance – of post-modern critiques on the grounds of their inherent affiliation to Hindutva. Clearly, this is a political positioning, not an academic one. And it is a positioning which relies on the binary oppositions of indigenism to (Enlightenment) rationalism; of pre-modern ‘fuzziness’ to the clarity of the modern; and indeed even of ‘faith’ to secular rationality. Finally, if I may draw together Sarkar’s two essays, his positioning would by extension place fascism, ethnicism, and Hindu nationalism all in direct opposition to rationality, and completely outside the frameworks of liberal modernity.

Sarkar’s initial essay on the “Fascism of the Sangh Parivar” prompted three lengthy rejoinders, the first by Achin Vanaik, the second by Rustom Bharucha and the third by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Vanaik’s essay is a detailed attempt to theorize fascism from a Marxist perspective, and my shorthand description of it here is intended only to identify its specific points of intersection with Sarkar’s arguments.⁵² Very briefly then, Vanaik takes issue with Sarkar’s use of the word ‘fascism,’ establishing approximately what he calls a ‘fascist minimum,’ and arguing essentially that “the fascist paradigm itself is inappropriate or of very limited value for situating ... Hindu communalism” (1740). He continues to say that without an accepted theory of fascism, “the assignment of ‘fascist’ emphasis and weight must remain arbitrary, the method a solipsism” (1740). In this

⁵¹ Sarkar 1998:101.

context, the rhetorical use of the word ‘fascism’ could become misleading, even counter-productive, suggesting “‘extreme’ outcomes ...[rather than] the longer menu of options that would presumably be the truer and more open-ended reality on the ground. This could disorient the organization of opposition to the Hindu communal Right” (1743). But if this appears to be the conclusion of Vanaik’s argument, it is not. In spite of his rejection of the fascist paradigm for the Indian context, Vanaik does not completely let go of the fascist idea as one that is *potentially* relevant to India. He writes: “In post-colonial societies, the political vehicles of religious fundamentalism or religious nationalism are not fascist formations, but ... *potential fascist formations*” (1740, my italics). So the rise of present-day communalism may be evidence only of a failed Nehruvian post-colonial project and not of fascism, but this greater threat is always waiting in the wings, always a potential danger within ethnicism itself. Further, given Vanaik’s doubts on the rhetorical value of words like ‘fascism,’ witness with what a looming sense of danger he leaves us: “If [the Sangh Parivar] appropriates the Indian state, ... [the] task for secularists, democrats and socialists will become immeasurably more difficult as the dark night of an authoritarian and communal Hindu state descends upon us” (1745). We in India may not have a full-blooded fascism on our hands, then, but we do have something very close to it in form – “a dangerous and pernicious phenomenon ... responsible for barbarous actions *akin to those perpetrated by fascists of the past*” (1742, emphasis added) – which is only slightly less frightening. The political position delineated by Sarkar remains, even after Vanaik’s essay, more or less intact.

⁵² Achin Vanaik, “Situating the threat of Hindu nationalism: problems with the fascist paradigm” in *Economic and Political Weekly* July 9 1994, 1729-48. Further references are incorporated into the text.

Still, stopping just short of “naming fascism” is not enough for Rustom Bharucha.⁵³ If Vanaik was searching for a “good social science theory or paradigm [that] must above all explain and understand things better” (1994:1742), Bharucha, like Sarkar, is more concerned with political positioning. In his view Vanaik “minimizes, if not elides altogether the very real features of fascism that are echoed uncannily in the activities and philosophy of the Hindu communal and fundamentalist combine” (1998:117). One must *name* fascism, says Bharucha, with the ‘forthrightness’ and ‘boldness’ of a Sumit Sarkar or an Aijaz Ahmed. And following Ahmed, who held the distinction between fascism and rightwing authoritarianism as ‘surely academic,’⁵⁴ Bharucha too writes that “while the discrimination of ‘fascism proper’ from ‘xenophobia’ and ‘cultural relativism’ needs to be kept in mind, it should not be so fetishized that it prevents one from reading the ‘writing on the wall’: the very real signs of violence and brutality by which the boundaries between ‘xenophobia,’ ‘exclusivism,’ and ‘fascism’ are blurred if not obliterated. Only the most pedantic and self-defeating scholarship would insist on such a discrimination” (1998:118).

six critiques

It is perhaps true that Vanaik misses the point of Sarkar’s essay, but not the one about Indian fascism, as Bharucha would have us believe. Vanaik does not see that, in a strange sense, this debate on fascism is not about whether the paradigm fits at all. Nor is the debate ostensibly about the conditions and institutions of modernity, though Vanaik

⁵³ Rustom Bharucha, “On the border of fascism: manufacture of consent in *Roja*” in *In the name of the Secular: contemporary cultural activism in India*” (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1998) 115-39. A shorter version of Bharucha’s article was first published in *Economic and Political Weekly* June 4 1994, 1389-95. Further references are incorporated into the text.

points out that the fascist state is a distinctive form of the modern state. It is about *naming fascism*, or in words often used with reference to the Sangh Parivar, it is about 'constructing the enemy.' 'defining the 'target-area,' moving away in alignments of clear opposition from the "suicidal wobbling" (Sarkar 1993:164) of intellectual critique. And what is said to be at stake, necessitating the naming of fascism? By implication, the answer would be that humanity itself is at stake, given the 'violence and brutality' of Hindu communalism. An answer with an eye for far more realistic and sustained implications, however, would look to the diversity within humanity as that which is most threatened by fascism's gradual consolidation. 'Diversity' in this case means not only a wide range of ethnic assertions and accommodations in everyday life – a meaning implicit in calls for peaceful co-existence – but also a diversity of class positions and individual expressions of identity that go beyond religion, a diversity which is 'ruthlessly homogenized' by Hindu ethnicism (Sarkar 1993:166). The reference here is to the scientific, rational, thinking, autonomous subject who has the right to ethnic identity, no doubt, but who *must keep that identity in line*, separate from and even subordinate to the more pressing material needs of 'roti, kapada aur makaan' (food, clothing and shelter). Ethnicism can gain sway over such a rational subject only by hegemonic processes of "molecular permeation," or indoctrination, creating impractical and essentially irrational affinities to ethnic groups and so "shattering the unity in struggle of toilers and all subordinate groups" (Sarkar 1993:166) and fostering the emergence of fascism. Having set up this binary opposition of rational (Marxist, good) versus irrational (ethnicist/fascist, bad), Sarkar warns against critiques of Enlightenment rationalism and

⁵⁴ Ahmed 1996:1338.

skepticism for these could problematize such binaries and create disturbing alliances when the need of the hour is the clarity of uncompromising distance.

What does it mean to set up boundaries between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational,’ drawing the definitions of these words clearly from the very logic of the Enlightenment that was used to justify colonial rule in India? What does it mean to bring fascism, with all the weight of its own particular European history, to bear on ‘Hindutva’ and to help ‘us’ think about ‘ourselves’? Perhaps Sarkar and those other writers who fall in line with his views would say that this is one way of driving home the magnitude of this problem called Hindu communalism, of recognizing the enormity of the threat to the “social fabric” of India (by which is usually meant Nehruvian, socialist-secularism). As Aijaz Ahmed reminds us, until the Babri Masjid was demolished “in a fascist spectacle of gigantic proportions ... liberal/Left intellectuals, among whom I too belong, [were] a bit too sanguine about what we took to be the chances of Hindutva prevailing.”⁵⁵ The unexpected and frightening reality that Hindutva *would* prevail was the message of the demolition, which some members of the liberal/Left then took as their cue to speak out against the extremism they now understood to be fascist. Debates and disputations on whether the Sangh Parivar *is* or *is not* fascist can go on endlessly, as Vanaik points out, and they are not my primary concern here. I am more interested in the costs involved in naming fascism – or fundamentalism, for that matter. For if communal propaganda has found its way into everyday commonsensical ‘truths,’ so also has this critique. The discussion on the “fascism of the Sangh Parivar” is by no means exclusively an academic concern: the twin charges of ‘fascism’ and ‘fundamentalism’ are equally part of popular critique, and such

⁵⁵ Ahmed 1996:1331.

words increasingly dot the pages of newspapers and magazines with a casual, taken-for-granted, yet always condemnatory meaning. The words may still be overused, as they were in the days before the demolition, but now perhaps they are a necessary excess, for the critique cannot be underscored enough.

The costs involved in naming fascism can be described on many levels. For one, it would appear that it has become more important to fight fascism rather than understand ethnicism, more important to be an activist, even from an armchair, than an intellectual. Ethnicism disappears as an object of intellectual inquiry, and re-emerges as a grave object of activist concern. The result is that both understanding and activism suffer, for the directions of the latter are given largely by the verdicts of the former. Somewhat more perturbing to my mind, however, is the fact that naming fascism means rejecting critiques of modernity and rationality for fear of allying ourselves with the ethnicists. But in so doing would we not enter an equally problematic and disturbing alliance with those colonists who justified their rule over India by pointing to the inherent superiority of scientific rationalism over the 'ignorance' and 'superstition' of the 'natives'? Would we not, in other words, ourselves be reproducing Orientalism in the name of fighting ethnicism?

A detailed explication of the processes by which colonial discourse in India came to associate 'modernity' with science, scientific rationality and progress, relegating religion and belief to the realm of the pre-modern and even *anti*-modern, would be pertinent at this juncture but is beyond the scope of this essay. But – as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, in the last rejoinder to Sarkar referred to above – the result is “that analytical frameworks

derived from the legacies of European modernity create a peculiar split in our self-recognition or self-representation.”⁵⁶ Very simply, Indians come to regard those of *their own* practices and beliefs that are either closely associated with religion or which have no apparent ‘rational’ explanation as non-modern and even *irrational*.⁵⁷ Some then attempt to validate the knowledge given in ancient texts by explaining them in the language of modern physics, say, or mathematics: demonstrating that the premises of ancient texts hold good because modern science says so. Ashis Nandy calls such reliance on the “truth” of modern science pathetic, and an indication of the poor cultural self-confidence that eventually leads to zealotry. Chakrabarty, somewhat more usefully, points to the source of the split itself: “The problem is,” he writes, “that we do not have analytical categories in academic discourse that do justice to the real, everyday and multiple ‘connections’ we have to what we, in becoming modern, come to see as ‘non-rational’” (753). Describing a book by Sumit Sarkar on the nationalist movement in Bengal, Chakrabarty notes

a remarkable failure of the intellect in this book every time it is a question of interpreting or explaining the role ‘religion’ played in this political movement which did more than any other phase in modern Bengali history to bring to life and immortalize, for both Muslims and Hindus, the image of Bengal as a mother-goddess, demanding love and sacrifice from her children ... while [Sarkar] is willing to grant that a modern political movement may have to use ‘religion’ as a means to a political end... [he] disapproves of moments when, for the historical actors involved, religion [becomes] ‘an end in itself’ (753).

He quotes Sarkar: “Religion cultivated at first as a means to the end of mass contact and stimulation of morale, could all too easily become an end in itself” (753). The moment of

⁵⁶ Chakrabarty 1995:753. All further references to this essay will be incorporated into the text.

⁵⁷ And so Nehru wrote in his famous *Discovery of India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House 1961: “We have to get rid of that narrowing religious outlook, that obsession with the supernatural and metaphysical speculations, that loosening of the mind’s discipline in

particular discomfort for Sarkar comes in Sri Aurobindo Ghose's famous Uttarapara speech, delivered shortly after his release from the Alipore jail in May 1909: "I spoke once before... and I said then that this movement is not a political movement, and that Nationalism is not politics but religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today but I put it another way. I say no longer that Nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is sanatana dharma which for us is Nationalism." "For Sarkar, the Marxist historian," responds Chakrabarty, "the question never arises as to whether a religious sensibility could also use a political structure and vocabulary as a means to a (religious) end." But the failure "to give us any insights into the 'religious' that constantly erupts into the political in Indian modernity is not a personal failure. It is the failure of hyper-rationalism, a failure that marks the intellect of the colonial modern" (754).

seven languages

The cost involved in refusing to critique handed-down Enlightenment 'truths,' then, is not merely complicity with orientalist discourse that sees the 'science' of the West as essentially superior to the 'religion' of the East. The cost is also that we in much of the non-West come to see ourselves as incompletely modern, our religion a primitive non sequitur in the modern world, and nationalism the bearer of no more than a "'weak and distorted' caricature of 'full-blooded' bourgeois modernity."⁵⁸ We believe, though we may be loathe to admit it in so many words, that the hyper-rationalism of the colonial-modern is necessary to humanize us. We accept fully the "peculiar split in our self-recognition or self-representation," and dismiss religion, faith, and belief to the realms of

ceremonial and mystical emotionalism, *which come in the way of understanding ourselves and the world*" (552-3, emphasis added).

the private and the idiosyncratic. Or, when forced to acknowledge the great importance of religious faith in daily life, as women's groups were in the aftermath of the Shah Bano case, we admit religion, as Talal Asad says, "in the only legitimate space allowed to [it] by post-Enlightenment society, [as] *the right to individual belief*: the human condition is full of ignorance, pain and injustice, and religious symbols are a means of coming positively to terms with that condition."⁵⁹ This position, continues Asad, "comes to resemble the conception Marx had of religion as ideology – that is, as a mode of consciousness which is other than consciousness of reality, external to the relations of production, producing no knowledge, but expressing at once the anguish of the oppressed and a spurious consolation" (46). Since there isn't a vocabulary to structurally link religious faith to the institutions of the modern world, there is also no other way to admit belief *except* under the banner of rightful assertions of (ethnic) identity, *except* by fully secularizing belief, and allowing it to be consumed in a discourse of rights. The only real faith left in this context is the faith in the discourse of rights, secularized, individualized, and privatized: writes Asad, "with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production and the modern state... the weight of religion [shifts] more and more onto the moods and motivations of the individual believer. Discipline (intellectual and social) ... gradually abandon[s] religious space, letting "belief," "conscience," and "sensibility" take its place" (39). And when the discourse of rights is challenged, when *belief* comes to be far more important than the '*right to belief*,' when public collective identity asserts itself alongside private individual expression, we call this new notion ethnicism.

⁵⁸ Quoting Sumit Sarkar, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, "Literature of the reform and nationalist movements" in *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the present*, Ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. Vol. 1 (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1991); 184.

⁵⁹ Asad 1993:45-6. emphasis added.

Ashis Nandy tries to salvage some space for religious faith in the modern world by drawing a distinction between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology (the latter is quite the opposite of the Marxist idea, as readers will see). This is a distinction between the everyday practice of religion, “religion as a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural”; and religion as “sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests” – that is, religion as a defining aspect of ethnic identity. This distinction represents, for Nandy, a way of separating a rational, dispassionate, instrumental and almost clinical use of religion for political ends from the multiple traditions of faith and belief in everyday life; of separating politics from ‘true’ religion in some sense.⁶⁰ Indeed there is the need for a category to describe politicians and political players for whom religious affiliation is clearly nothing more than a new hat for a new day and a new vote-bank, and who have no qualms about manipulating religious sentiments and inciting riots in service of their own political ends. The problem with the category (and with the distinction that creates it), however, is that it would probably read *any* attempt to fuse religion and politics, faith and ideology as inherently ethnicist. The one exception to this, according to Nandy, is Gandhi – for whom he says the fusion of religion with politics “was not a political strategy meant to ensure his political survival in an uniquely multi-ethnic society like India” – a point

⁶⁰ In this sense, Nandy’s view is not unique: it is one that I have heard expressed on numerous occasions by cosmopolitan Hindu elites, who would express distaste for the ‘so-called Hinduism of the BJP’ while insisting that the ‘real’ Hinduism was a very different set of traditions that had nothing to do with politics. My interactions with these elites was never long enough to be able to ascertain the true extent of their own attachments to these ‘real’ traditions of Hinduism – and of course generalizations are prone to some amount of

which is debatable, at best, since there are many cases where it is well near impossible to know if political cost-calculations were taken into account, and more importantly what kind of calculations these were. Surely, inciting religious violence cannot be equated on the cost-calculation meter with making a strategic alliance with a minority party, or putting a contentious religious issue on the political back-burner. Gandhi, one could argue, was not above making such strategic moves himself. As such, Nandy does grave disservice to the work of several other nationalist leaders who also did not separate religion from politics – Lokamanya Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Subramania Bharati, and Sri Aurobindo Ghose, to name a few – and for whom fighting for Indian independence was hardly a career-building activity. A second problem with Nandy's formulation is the assumption that religion-as-ideology, or ethnicism as I have chosen to call it, perhaps because it is located squarely within the grid of modernity, *must* be fundamentally motivated by political cost-calculations and manipulations from above. In other words, it is just not *authentic* enough. Ethnicism becomes, in this view, a kind of false consciousness, or a conspiracy hatched at the highest levels of politics in selfish service of political ends. It is a cult of the modern in which "urban, westernized, middle-class, Brahmanic, Hindu nationalists and Hindu modernists" are the key participants, a creed which has no real meaning outside the small and secluded worlds of such people.⁶¹

inaccuracy – but it seemed that Hinduism here was more a marker of distinct identity than a daily practice of faith, more a statement about affiliation than a deep-seated set of beliefs.

⁶¹ This belief that Hindu nationalism is at its core a Brahmin-Bania (upper-caste, upper-class) phenomenon is persistently used to attack Hindu ethnicist claims to representation and authenticity. Thomas Blom Hansen has shown, however, that this notion is now largely fallacious: it does not take into account the fact that the Sangh Parivar today has a rural mass base consisting of large number of backward castes. He argues further that such 'classic left analysis' as such tells us nothing about how Hindutva has engendered a larger transformation of Indian politics, and that in an environment unfavorable to Brahminical ideologies (see Thomas Blom Hansen, "RSS and the popularization of

Finally, Nandy seems to assume that there *is* always a clear distinction to be made between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology, between the truly authentic and the obviously inauthentic, as it were. The question has to do with what is recognized as 'faith' and what is recognized as 'ideology' and by whom. As such, Nandy's distinction tells us nothing about those 'ethnicists' who may also be genuinely devout believers. Nor does it explain why a good many devout Hindus, for example, not all of them upper-caste or westernized, increasingly identify with 'Hindu nationalist' religion-as-ideology. Surely not all such belief can be ascribed to the success of 'right-wing' propaganda campaigns. Nandy's readers are left, to reiterate an earlier point, with a language that deals as problematically with ethnicism as the language of scientific rationality did with religion.

eight discomfort

For the discomfort that Sumit Sarkar feels at the moment when religion becomes an 'end in itself' on the national stage does not disappear with Nandy's recognition of a legitimate realm where traditions of religious faith operate. It is perhaps this discomfort – or at the *very least*, this discomfort – which characterizes most academic responses to ethnicism. Crossing over from realms of traditional belief and practice, or those of the private and the 'pre-modern' into ethno-nationalist politics, religion also crosses the limits demarcated for it by modern discourses of various kinds. This crossing which forges ethnicism from religion is also a serious transgression, a mixing of things which, in the name of secular statehood, were always meant to be kept apart. The first and perhaps most natural response is to deny that ethnicism has anything to do with 'true'

Hindutva" in *Economic and Political Weekly* October 16 1993, 2270-2, and also *The Saffron*

religion, a move which to my mind really only attempts to separate religion from politics without understanding how the one may have produced the other. The second response, which directly follows from the first, is to condemn ethnicism, sometimes by a logical taking-apart of its premises, and sometimes with whatever tools appear the most powerful, but either way by understanding it as a form of extremism. It is with this second response that this paper has thus far been most concerned. The cost is not just that writers end up with a poor understanding of ethnicist politics, but that we fail to recognize shades of our own complicity in the production of what we then call ethnicist discourse.

This is not to say that ethnicist movements are not capable of inciting violence and in fact thriving on it, that they are not fueled by political manipulations, distortions and connivances of the sort that can inspire nothing but the greatest distaste and outrage. This is not to say that, as academic observers of ethnic conflict, we should not oppose or even revile those aspects of ethnicist movements that threaten the freedoms, rights and indeed the lives of individuals or groups. Certainly, this is not to say that the only legitimate response to the violence of ethnicism would be a carefully constructed academic one. But is it then acceptable to allow our reactions to ethnicism in Europe to form our reactions to ethnicism in India, or in other parts of the world? Can the violence and brutality of Nazi Germany in all honesty be equated with communal violence in India, even with the kind that the Shiv Sena orchestrated in Bombay, simply because strong revulsion demands even stronger opposition? Is it appropriate to have words like 'fundamentalism,' 'fascism,' and 'pogrom' slip virtually imperceptibly from the pages of

Wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India (New Jersey: Princeton 1999).

Indian academic journals to the pages of the *New York Times*, and into casual conversations in and out of academic settings in the western world? For the referents for such words also shift substantially with each new act of cultural translation, and a New York journalist is probably not going to remember the history of the Babri Masjid dispute and even less the deeply meaningful multiple traditions of Rama-worship, when faced with a phenomenon which superficially resembles what happened in Germany once, and what continues to happen in the Balkan republics. To 'name fascism' to audiences outside of India is to allow the complex range of issues involved to slip into pre-packaged understandings and to evoke pre-determined reactions. It is to confirm, on the authority of educated Indians themselves, that India is at best a rogue nation with few scruples when it comes to dealing with minority groups, and with little concern for its millions of poor. It is also to confirm, albeit indirectly, that old British myth that India needs the twin legacies of colonialism and rationalism first if it is to stay together, a coherent political whole, and second if it is to fully become a Just Society.

Concepts and categories, with all their accumulated cultural baggage, surely cannot be lifted from one context and imposed wholesale on another. This is my argument, at its simplest. The debate on fascism, I have suggested, is not about properly understanding ethnicism at all (not even for Vanaik, who attempts to explore fascism further, not ethnicism); rather, it is a political positioning which passes off as an understanding. The result is a model which reflects a problematic comprehension of Indian ethnicism (and indeed also of fascism). The issue here is not whether non-Indian constructs can at all be used to describe Indian realities, but whether the constructs are *suited* to such descriptions. What assumptions do writers bring to a study of Indian ethnicism when the

starting point for analysis is say, Islamic fundamentalism or European fascism? How do we bring western concepts to bear on non-western societies? What are the risks and costs involved in such attempts at cultural translation?

Perhaps one answer to my questions about allying with orientalist perspectives would be that this is preferable to an alliance with ethnicism in any case, that it would be better to err on the side of imperialist Enlightenment rationalism than come too close to the Hindu nationalist position. One harm, it could be said, is better than the other. But such an answer would equally reflect a poor understanding of the forces, processes and reasonings which have produced Hindu ethnicism in its present form. An argument central to 'Hindutva' ideology is, after all, that most Indian intellectuals have failed to assess or even acknowledge the damage done by such concepts as 'rationalism' and 'secularism' to the modern Indian polity. Consider, for instance the controversy late last year over the HRD (Human Resources Development) Ministry's suggestion that school curricula be "Indianized, nationalized and spiritualized." Setting aside for the moment the many complicated charges and counter-charges that made the controversy, I might note two positions on the issue that are really at the core of the debate. First, this move by the Ministry was in a sense based on a rejection of the idea that religion and spirituality are irrational and therefore have no legitimate place in models of scientific education. Second, the great opposition to even the introduction of the idea for debate clearly indicates that some notion of rationality and scientific education derived from Enlightenment thought is still the given norm, in contrast to all things associated with religion or spirituality. In essence, then, the controversy was not so much over a

proposed policy-change, but about the decision *to critique* our intellectual inheritances from the European Enlightenment (and of course their different forms in post-Enlightenment, post-colonial society), or *to defend* them, with all available tools, for fear of giving in to the presumed ‘irrationality’ of the ‘Hindu Right.’ At such a juncture, to refuse a critical understanding of the very legacies of the enlightenment that ethnicism in India is now seriously challenging is not merely to construct ethnicists as ‘extremists,’ but also to concede the point that such legacies have not in the past been adequately questioned. It is deeply ironic – and telling – that a position which is constructed almost exclusively by its opposition to Hindutva/ethnicism/fascism is exactly that position from which many ethnicist critiques depart.

The point is not just that the Indian Left has “ceded to the fascists all moments of poetry, mysticism, the religious and the mysterious in the construction of political sentiments and communities (however transient or inoperative).”⁶² The point is also that Hindu ethnicism needs to be seen among other things as an elaborate (though maybe not always eloquent or coherent) response to classic Marxist and Nehruvian socialist positions on a range of issues, the most important of which is religion. To ‘name fascism’ “out of a fear that our romanticism *must* be the same as whatever the Europeans produced under that name in their histories, and that our present blunders, whatever these are, *must* be the same as theirs in the past” is clearly to submit to a Eurocentric imagining of that fear.⁶³ But then it is also a failure or maybe an unwillingness to recognize the work of our own hands as the very objects of ethnicist critique. It hardly bears mentioning that ethnicist critique cannot really be taken for what it is, for if ethnicism itself occupies the realms of

⁶² Chakrabarty 1995:758.

the irrational or the political-instrumental, then so also must its guiding ideology. The implication is, as Talal Asad notes of responses to religious orthodoxy in the Saudi Arabian context, that this is not “*reasoned criticism*” (1993:209 [sic]), but something closer to the crazed rantings of fanatics. Such analysis, Asad continues in a footnote, in the end actually “tells us more about the writer’s notions of psychological and political normalcy than about the actual motives of those involved or the persuasive powers of their discourses” (Asad 1993:fn16). Ethnicist critiques of certain aspects of modernity, and specifically socialism in the Indian context, could then be regarded as a prompt towards greater self-reflexivity, were writers prepared to consider it as such. But ‘naming fascism’ or extremism of a most pernicious variety prevents us from even considering the possibility of links or points of intersection between ideas that the academic community has long held dear and aspects of ethnicist discourse. Instead, the ‘discomfort’ caused by the tabooed mixing of religion with politics – and that not just as an ideology, but even at times as an ‘end in itself’ – leads to a more-or-less radical distancing, which effectively prohibits any serious consideration of the substance of ethnicist discourse. More than isolating the evil and simplifying the matter too much, as Thomas Blom Hansen has suggested, it prevents us from asking some distinctly uncomfortable questions about *ourselves*.⁶⁴

⁶³ Chakrabarty 1995:758; emphasis added.

⁶⁴ It should be noted, however, that Hansen too subscribes to the view that Hindu ethnicism (specifically the RSS) represents a form of “swadeshi fascism” (a specifically Indian version of fascism); he rejects the label in the end not because it is not true, but because it prevents further analysis. The kinds of uncomfortable questions Hansen refers to are also somewhat different from my own: for instance, they have to do with the “uneasiness with a democracy that creates disorder, [an] uneasiness that has arisen historically when the “masses” have stepped out of their pre-designed roles as recipients and consumers of government policies and political rhetoric” (1999:235-7). My own emphasis (for the moment

What are the institutional contexts in which we operate and from which our analyses are produced? What personal and professional considerations influence our choice of some models over others and our diagnoses of pathology and perversion? To quote Asad once again, "There are varieties of knowledge to be learnt [and] a host of models to be imitated and reproduced. In some cases knowledge of these models is a precondition for the production of more knowledge; in other cases *it is an end in itself*, a mimetic gesture of power, an expression of desire for transformation. A recognition of this well-known fact reminds us that industrial capitalism transforms not only modes of production but also kinds of knowledge and styles of life in the Third World."⁶⁵ Could it be then that our current knowledge about ethnicism is produced not just by academic inquiry, but by a particular *style* of academic inquiry? that we are as much if not more invested in a style of writing, thinking and learning as we are in a search for understanding?

nine questions

Aside from so re-evaluating the institutional situatedness of knowledge, another way to approach the problematic of ethnicism would be to 'set discomfort aside' as it were. Discomfort, I have suggested, is a somewhat problematically constituted context from which much academic knowledge about ethnicism emerges, but ethnicism exists in other contexts also. Part of the cost of taking (antagonistic) political positions is that it also prevents writers from asking questions about or otherwise seeking to understand the myriad forces and the conditions which produce ethnicist ideologies, sentiments, and

at least) is more on academic constructions of ethnicism than on the social conditions that produce it.

movements. That is, by tying us down to *a* position of unequivocal opposition, it prevents us from analyzing the multiple *contexts*, both local and global, that interact to produce ethnicism. Instead of ‘naming fascism’ for instance we might ask questions about how socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts create ethnicist posturing: how the culture of late-capitalism and globalization give rise to particular senses of disenfranchisement, threat, and loss that sometimes find expression in ethnicist campaigns. We might seek to document ethnicist sensibility, in other words, by tracing the links between discourses of politics, activism, religion on the one hand and ethnicism on the other. If activist and academic observations about the ‘communalization of society’ are to be taken seriously, then these various fields of discourse are not so separate from ethnicism as we might like to believe. Quite the contrary, ethnicist ideologies “are not alien or marked off from respectable ranges of opinion but in fact have deep connections with them. They deserve to be listened to closely before being exoticized as a figment of the politically extreme or being ethically condemned too precipitously.”⁶⁶ We might seek to understand what Douglas Holmes, working on post-cold-war European politics, has called “illicit discourse,” which he defines thus:

An illicit discourse aims at reestablishing the boundaries, terms and idioms of political struggle. The resulting political practice is deconstructive. Its authority is often parasitic, drawing strength from the corruption, ineptitude, obsolescence, and lost relevance of the established political dogmas and agendas. Its practitioners negotiate and map the points of contradiction and fatigue of particular positions. They scavenge the detritus of decaying politics, probing areas of deceit and deception. By so doing they invoke displaced histories and reveal deformed moralities. They strive to introduce the unvoiced and unspeakable into

⁶⁵ Talal Asad, “The concept of translation in British Social Anthropology” in James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1988) 158, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ George Marcus, “The uses of complicity in the changing mis-en-scène of Anthropological fieldwork” in *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1998) 124.

public debate. Established political forces resist these “illicitudes,” defining those who articulate them as racists, terrorists, bigots or as some form of essentialized pariah.”⁶⁷

Deconstructing the mythologies that would read ethnicism as extremism, and ethnicists as exotic, almost Byzantine cultural others would require entering difficult and possibly uncomfortable alliances with ethnicists, certainly. But the discomfort of such alliances could be productive, enabling new forms of inquiry into ethnicism instead of imposing the usual, inescapable oppositions. We might for example re-think the opposition of religion to politics, authentic to inauthentic, not only to consider elements of our own complicity in ethnicist discourse, but equally to be able to ask how religion becomes politicized, or even how politics may look to religion and religious practice for idioms, methods, and ideas of the Good and the Just. How does religion constitute the activity of the world? What gets assigned to the realms of the ‘unvoiced and unspeakable’ that Holmes writes of, and why? What are the ‘points of contradiction and fatigue’ that ethnicism identifies and builds upon? Rather than relying on models of ethnicism that are clearly given by its harshest critics, such questions would attempt an understanding of the appeal of ethnicism for its practitioners and its ‘converts’. The first move would not be towards a political stance, but to try to understand ethnicism’s practitioners as being something *other* than “aberrant, usually backward or hoodwinked versions of modern subjects.”⁶⁸

The journalist Arun Shourie has remarked that there were many kinds of people at the site of the Babri Masjid on the day it was demolished: politicians, sadhus, kar sevaks,

⁶⁷ Douglas R. Holmes, “Illicit discourse” in George Marcus, ed., *Perilous States: Conversations on culture, politics and nation*, Late Editions 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993) 255.

⁶⁸ Harding 1991:374.

bhaktas, and others; *believers and non-believers alike*.⁶⁹ Academic discourse clearly has the conceptual means and thus also a propensity to deal (in some fashion) with the non-believers – the opportunists, the hangers-on, the rowdys – but no vocabulary to deal with those for whom the question of the mosque remained *at least partially* an issue of some deep religious significance. It is important to note here that this is as true of the work that seeks to understand the causes and mechanisms of ethnicism as of the work that begins with a condemnation of all things ethnicist. The perspective I have outlined above, although not dismissive of ethnicism, is itself distinctly *modern*, which is to say that it is guided largely by the discourses and assumptions of modernity. Belief, in such a context, along with religious faith and devotion (*bhakti*) are concepts which inevitably come to be secularized by being incorporated into the discourses of politics, nationalism, and of course rights. The emphasis on the individual and the private inevitably sees the collective and the public as homogenizing, hegemonic forces which can be acceptable, even valuable, as sources of a benign sense of ethnic difference, but which also manage the collective only by suffocating the individual. My point is that no matter how sympathetically academics approach ethnicism or other such tabooed mixtures, there remains still an element of discomfort when it comes to dealing with religion in politics, the collective over the personal, and a tendency to demarcate, à la Nandy, areas of ‘faith’ and areas of ‘ideology.’ There remains the risk, as Rustom Bharucha has said, of efforts to address the links between religious consciousness and political expression leading

⁶⁹ Arun Shourie, *Indian Controversies* (New Delhi: Harper Collins 1993) xv. He writes: “While they [the Hindus present] were propelled to [demolition] no doubt by what successive governments, the courts, the secularists were doing and not doing, the fact is in the end a mob took the law into its own hands...” (xv).

merely to “an instrumentalist reading of religion as an adjunct to political activity.”⁷⁰

Where does faith end and ideology begin? At what point does religion stop being religion and become transformed into politics? If ‘ideology’ is all about the acquisition of (political) power, then by implication does ‘faith’ exist in a realm devoid of power-structures? My intention is not so much to question the existence or analytical value of such categories as ‘faith’ or ‘politics,’ but rather their *separateness*, and the lines along which their separateness is defined. For if we are to truly understand the seepage of faith into ideology, of religion into politics, without attaching tags of authenticity or inauthenticity to either realm, there has to be a way to regard religion, belief and faith – and so also ethnicity – as the bearers of something other than ‘false consciousness.’⁷¹

Scholars say of course that religion and even religious faith are not timeless, transcendent entities; that they have their own particular histories, within which the modern story of ethnicity is one major part. But from the point of view of the believer, such observations are hardly relevant, if they are considered to be true at all. Belief is predicated among

⁷⁰ Rustom Bharucha, *The Question of Faith*, Tracts for the Times 3 (New Delhi: Orient Longman 1993) 8. Here Bharucha writes critically of Subaltern Studies scholarship, charging that even such innovative historians have failed to consider religious belief systems as central to subaltern consciousness and expression, and therefore also to find adequate methods to study them. Would such an argument not apply to studies and commentaries on ethnicity? Is not the role of religious belief as central to ethnicist consciousness as it would be to subaltern sentience? Bharucha’s application of one set of rules for the subaltern and entirely another for the ethnicist is yet another clear example of the tendency in Indian academic discourse to treat ethnicity as an essentially inauthentic expression or use of religion simply because it participates in mainstream political discourse, and not in more private (more authentic) realms.

⁷¹ Once again see Asad (1988) for a critique of “the tendency to read the *implicit* in alien cultures” (160) and the difficulty-ridden processes of cultural translation. He writes: “the process of “cultural translation” is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power – professional, national, international. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies. Given that that is

other things after all on notions of the timeless and the transcendent. So practices may change, contexts may change, and even rituals may have to be re-molded according to the needs of the changing world, but there are aspects of faith and religious practice which have remained constant: not unchanging, but constant. There is a large corpus of work on the fashioning of Hindu ethnicist identity which highlights the *transformation* of elements from a rich and diverse tradition into something far more aggressive, militarized, and homogenous. Philip Lutgendorf writes for example of historically diverse interpretations of the legend of Rama, from Tulsidas' *Ramcharitamanas* to modern-day nationalism.⁷² Peter van der Veer tells us that competing models of devotional practice have contributed to the constructions of modern-day Hinduism.⁷³ Anuradha Kapur traces the transformation of representations of Rama from a child to a warrior of modern India. In these accounts and others, it is change that is stressed, not continuity; transformation that is emphasized, not constancy.⁷⁴ And yet readers might note that even such accounts ironically provide as much evidence of the un-changed as they do of the irrevocably different. We might note that the figure of Rama himself, as a deity, as the object of devotion, and as a symbol of the Good and the Just is largely a constant, even in a broader narrative about historicity and change; that it is this constant at the core of a diversity of traditions all over India that enables a Tamilian or a Telugu-

so, the interesting question for enquiry is ... how power enters into the process of "cultural translation," seen both as a discursive and non-discursive practice" (163).

⁷² Philip Lutgendorf, "Interpreting *Ramraj*: Reflections on the *Ramayana*, Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism" in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity, and Political Action*, ed. David Lorenzen (Albany: SUNY Press 1995) 253-87.

⁷³ Peter van der Veer, "The Politics of Devotion to Rama" in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community, Identity, and Political Action*, ed. David Lorenzen (Albany: SUNY Press 1995) 288-305. See also van der Veer's *Gods on Earth: the management of religious experience and identity in a North Indian pilgrimage center* (London: Athlone 1988).

speaker who hardly understands Tulsidas' Awadhi-bhasha (Awadhi language) to nevertheless identify with the bhakti and the emotion of the verses. It could be argued that traditions of bhakti themselves may not *always* have existed in Hindu practice. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that these traditions have been in some form or other a defining feature of Hindu belief for over three hundred years. We might begin to access realms of faith and belief by recognizing that such strong cultural continuities exist alongside historical transformations, by noting that aspects of the timeless and the transcendent are also present in the ever-shifting movements of history. Then perhaps the appeal of Hindutva would not appear so irrational or fanatical, but as something intimately linked to the multiple overlapping worlds – social, religious, political, economic – of everyday experience. The opposition between *Hinduism* and *Hindutva*, faith and ideology, would be fundamentally and permanently problematized.

How does religion order the social world? This is by no means a new question for Indian scholarship but one that has framed and guided a large number of works on religion and religious practice in India.⁷⁵ And yet because faith and ideology are construed as distinct from one another, the one authentic and the other not, this is a question never posed in the context of ethnicism. My argument is that it needs to be asked in just such a context.

ten translations

⁷⁴ Anuradha Kapur, "Deity to Crusader: the changing iconography of Ram" in *Hindus and Others*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey (New Delhi: Viking 1993) 74-109.

⁷⁵ For example, see Diana Eck and Devaki Jain, eds. *Speaking of Faith* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers 1987); Patricia Jeffrey *Frogs in a Well: Indian women in Purdah* (London: Zed Books 1989); Shaheeda Lateef *Muslim Women in India: Political and private realities* (London: Zed Books 1990); Julia Leslie ed. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (New Jersey: Associated University Press 1991); Susan Wadley "Women and the Hindu tradition" in *Signs* 3 (1977) 113-25;

Writes Dipesh Chakrabarty once again of split colonial-modern subjectivity:

A large range of our pleasures, desires, emotions and understanding of what constitutes the social (including the family) have the religious built into them at least as collectively practiced rituals. How else could I ... have emotional access to the human and other relationships conjured up in (middle-class versions of) the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, in 'medieval' Bengali literature about minor gods and goddesses, in Vaishnava stories and songs about Radha and Krishna, in the puranic legends about Durga and Kali, in the mystical songs of 'bauls' and 'fakirs'? What makes it possible for me (and many others) to be moved by nationalist songs of Mukundadas, Tagore, D.L.Roy, Atulprasad Sen, Nazrul Islam that draw directly on 'dharma'/kinship to provide a sense of the nation/community? It is obviously because the processes of becoming 'modern' in the Bengali context never left these things out so that my desires, emotions, aesthetics and even my sense of what it means to be a person were never trained simply in the light of world-view that was just liberal or 'secular'...(1995:753).

The 'modern' and the so-called 'non-modern' are not opposites in daily life, clearly, but

they are not identical either. There is a peculiar co-existence amidst the withdrawing

polarities of the modern, one which is ever-comfortable and ever-contradictory. And so

Indians whose professional lives are naturally guided by the irrefutable logic of science

and mathematics just as naturally have astrologers draw up horoscopes upon the birth of

each of their children, to use an old stereotype. They may, as the children grow older,

have to explain to them the validity of certain customs or beliefs in the language of

western Science and Reason, but they will not abandon these because Science says there

is no proof for them. Nor, it should be said, will many of their children. Writes

A.K.Ramanujan, "when Indians learn, quite expertly, modern science, business, or

technology, they 'compartmentalize' these interests... the new ways of thought and

behavior do not replace, but live along with the older, 'religious' ways. Computers and

typewriters receive *ayudhapuja* ('worship of weapons') as weapons of war did once. The

'modern,' the context-free, becomes one more context, though it is not easy to contain."⁷⁶

The intersections of modern and non-modern, politics and religion, individual and

collective, cannot in other words be mapped on Cartesian grids, and doing so will result only in the resurrection of insular categories and a loss of a sense of their complex entanglements. At the same time it is important to see also that the 'compartmentalization' Ramanujan speaks of is also differentially value-based: the recognized conduits of progress and development and the recognized seats of worldly power *are* the structures and institutions of modernity. In this context, efforts to explain traditional beliefs by re-casting them in the language of Science and Reason are not, as Ashis Nandy would have us believe, so much evidence of a 'pathetic lack of cultural self-confidence,' but are attempts to meet the requirements and compulsions of a world in which Reason holds undeniable sway.⁷⁷ These too are attempts at translation, from culture to culture, world-view to world-view, really not so distinct from our own academic ventures to understand and interpret the world around. They may be flawed and productive only of mis-translations, but they are unavoidable, even necessary. "It may be," as Chakrabarty concludes, "precisely an irony of our modernity that we are constantly called upon ... to treat a bad translation as though it was a perfectly adequate one ... This is not a question of having to dissemble or simulate, it is rather a question of having to live poorly, in and as bad translations" (1995:755).

⁷⁶ A.K.Ramanujan, "Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23/1 (1989) 57.

⁷⁷ It is not Reason, in any case, that needs to be critiqued, but the web of assumptions that surround it. For example, if there is no scientific proof for a phenomenon, does it mean the phenomenon does not exist? It is often assumed, when dealing with religion and faith, that the absence of rational/scientific evidence demonstrates that religious phenomena are fictional, and that belief in them is therefore irrational. The truly rational person, I was told twice in India (once by a scientist and once by a teacher of history) would be one who admits that the absence of proof indicates only the flaws or inabilities of science, and has as such no bearing on the phenomenon in question. Reason itself is not in doubt, but the Cult of the Rational is, and with it the value-based assumptions of modernity that cloak rationality.

Chakrabarty veers towards fatalism, but I prefer the willful perseverance of Ramanujan: “must translate and turn/ till I blister and roast...” Seeing the given knowledge about religion, religious faith and ethnicism as ‘bad translation’ to me is a starting point and not a conclusion. Recognizing that theories of ethnicism as pathology/perversion/pernicious extremism are in large measure the products of specific institutional relations and practices of power, as Talal Asad has argued, is crucial – but this also is a point of departure. How does religion order the *modern* social world? writers might ask, re-considering old questions in new contexts; re-thinking our positionings, institutional and otherwise, vis-à-vis these issues; understanding that modernity is a force all at once problematic, dominant, inescapable, by which our voices too are constituted. We might ask, remembering then to link our modern representations with ideas from another conceptual space and time: “A story is told about two men coming to Yudhisthira with a case. One had bought the other’s land, and soon after found a crock of gold in it. He wanted to return it to the original owner of the land, who was arguing that it really belonged to the man who had now bought [the land]. They had come to Yudhisthira to settle their virtuous dispute. Just then Yudhisthira was called away ... When he came back the two gentlemen were quarrelling furiously, but each was claiming the treasure for himself this time! Yudhisthira realized at once that the age had changed, and *kaliyuga* had begun.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Yudhisthira is the oldest of the Pandavas from the epic *Mahabharata*, the son of Dharma (Dharmaputra), known for his adherence to *dharma* or an ethical code with a range of meanings: truth, duty, role, function, righteousness and law. ‘Kaliyuga’ is the last of four recurring epochs in the Hindu reckoning of time; ‘Kali’ being the name of the deity that presides over all that is unworthy and dreadful in the world, and ‘yuga’ meaning epoch or age. The ‘Age of Kali’ then is a time characterized by conflict, difficulty, suffering and tumult. It is much larger than modernity of course, but encompasses the modern period as well. The story is retold in Ramanujan 1989:51.

CHAPTER TWO

CULTURES

introduction

This essay will describe the growth and development of two women's groups in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad in Andhra Pradesh, India. I approached both groups initially not so much because I was interested in the broad range of issues that occupied them, but because I wanted to know more about how their activism was being molded and re-molded by emerging issues of difference and diversity. Specifically, I was interested in religion. But at some point in between my comings and goings from Hyderabad, I realized that although this remained my particular area of interest, it was inseparable from the work of the organization itself, inseparable even from the lives of the women activists involved. Trying to focus exclusively on one set of issues was like pulling a single book from a pile and not seeing that all the volumes above would then come tumbling down. I stopped asking about religion and violence and communalism, and started asking about histories and involvements and lives. And so it happened that I was sometimes referred to as the person who would finally write a history of these groups – half-jokingly or maybe indulgently – at least because no-one else seemed to have the time. For reasons that will eventually become clear, however, I was never entirely comfortable with the responsibilities of this assigned task. I carried the mantle uneasily, often insisting that my work was really about other things and anyway, I was not the right person for this job. My protests were met again with indulgence. What follows, then, is among other things an attempt to hold up my end of this decidedly unofficial bargain: it is a *partial* history of events and forces that have shaped activism in Hyderabad (and to

some extent all over India), bringing into existence out of one parent organization, two groups called “Anveshi” and “Asmita.”

the uses of complexity

To the outsider, the office of a women’s organization appears an uneven combination of the public and the formal on the one hand and the private, the familiar, and the casual on the other. Here is an office environment much like any other, where people are bustling around, pre-occupied with their own jobs and their own responsibilities. As with office environments also, however, everyone knows everyone else, and there are times of respite and relaxation when the urgency of business subsides, and the atmosphere is suddenly one of friendship and casual familiarity. But not uniformly so. Most women’s groups today are by and large two-tiered structures, which is to say that there is one group of women who form the ‘Executive Council’ (or its equivalent), an administrative and decision-making body (whose members I refer to as the activists), and another group who take care of the day-to-day activities of the organization (the staff). Although women in both groups share much by way of commitment and spirit, there are clear differences in educational background, experience, even fluency and familiarity with academic vocabularies that emphasize the differences already created by professional title designations. In other words, there is a corporate hierarchy clearly in operation.¹

My past (admittedly fleeting) contact with women’s organizations in Bangalore (Vimochana) and Mumbai (Forum) had led me to believe that the groups functioned largely by *de-emphasizing* power differentials, that they were more egalitarian bodies than corporate ones. Before going to Hyderabad, I had enquired about membership

requirements, and recall being told that there was no membership *as such* that I could apply for, and that I was welcome to come and go as I wished. I assumed this meant that the structure of the groups would be loose, informal, and open to the presence and participation of strangers – which they were, and Anveshi somewhat more so than Asmita, but only in certain *formally* circumscribed ways. The more-or-less corporatized nature of these organizations posed some particular problems for me as a student researcher, but I will leave accounts of those for another time. Here I want only to note that my interest in the ‘institutionality’ of these groups was motivated first by a personal discomfort with such corporatized structures, and by a sense of frustration born of knowing they offered me no logical point of entry. Academic interest came much later: it developed, oddly enough, when I was well-known to both groups through my music or through other friendships, and informally at least no longer an outsider. I became interested then in exploring the relationship between institutional structure and intellectual perspective, and that in essence marks the starting point also for the present essay.

Needless to say, women’s groups have not always functioned as corporate entities; in fact the question of whether or not to become involved in institution-building has emerged only relatively recently, as part of the growth of the women’s movement itself.

Sometime in the mid-eighties, a certain weariness begins to set in among activists, who complain about feeling “burnt out” and more, unable to see much scope for growth within current modes of activism. Asks Vasanth Kannabiran (now with Asmita), “how much longer can we keep on with wife-beating, dowry death, and rape? Should we set up

¹ This statement is in fact far more true of Asmita than of Anveshi, for reasons I will

crisis centers to help? ... should we be a social service or a political organization? Unless one begins to theorize experience and consolidate [understanding], political action can seem a hopeless, repetitive task."² This sense of exhaustion (and the debate, by that time national, on the academic/activist divide) comes hand-in-hand with an enhanced feeling of need to more systematically address the *complexity* of social problems activists encounter. Activists decide therefore that an institutional structure that allows for more study and reflection, research and theorization is necessary. How corporatized this institution should be and how it should combine reflection and study on the one hand with activism on the other are matters still being debated. In fact, different approaches to these very issues have created some amount of tension, both personal and professional in character, between the two groups with which I was associated. As a result, Asmita is a much more corporatized, and self-consciously activist organization, whereas Anveshi is somewhat looser in structure, primarily oriented towards women's studies research. Neither group is directly involved in grassroots activism.

Leaving aside differences between groups for the moment, we might note that what still unites their approaches is this notion of 'complexity.'³ Activists often remark that in their younger days they did not pay much attention to the *complexities* of social problems, that they were naïve and perhaps heady, and that their activism was of the "fire-fighting" variety directed against a monolithic 'patriarchy'. 'Complexity,' then – to

explain a little later on in this paper.

² Vasantha Kannabiran, "Report from SSS, a Women's group in Hyderabad" in *Feminist Studies* 12/3 (1986) 612.

³ I hasten to clarify that I am using this word here as an analytical category, whereas it is used by activists only in conversation, as a roughly descriptive term. In this sense, the usage is my own, and not one borrowed from activist vocabularies. I will define this term further at several points in the course of this paper.

offer only a preliminary definition – might loosely refer to the systemic nature of gender oppressions (which merely a ‘fire-fighting’ activism could never address fully), but more than that I think to questions of *diversity*, or the range of competing concerns raised by Dalit (lower/backward caste) groups, religious minorities, even mainstream Hindutva, and the intersections of these with issues of gender. Looking back thus on their own lives and their own careers, women activists seem to assume that the complexities were *always* there; the problem was only that *they* did not see them. In the process of recognizing and critiquing the dominance of ‘upper caste/upper class’ women within the women’s movement, activists sometimes go as far as to suggest that other identities (of caste and religion) did not only go unnoticed, but were in fact *suppressed* by the majoritarian character of women’s activism.⁴

But did these identities always exist in such form as to be ‘suppressed’? Were they really never before noticed *only* because of the hegemonically Brahmin-Hindu nature of Indian society? One could argue that since such hegemony continues to exist, minority identities should continue also to be concealed – but they are not; politicized identities of all hues are anything but invisible in modern India. It seems to me no coincidence that ethnicist movements appear not so much in pre-Independence days in spite of Partition, but a full thirty years after 1947, when India’s handling of democracy and its experiments with socialism are beginning to deliver critical blows, both politically and economically. It would take longer than a decade after that for Hindu ethnicism to emerge as a political force, and longer still for the Dalit (lower caste) movement to come into its own. Even the word ‘secular’ – India’s public acknowledgement of diversity and commitment to

⁴ Susie Tharu of Anveshi in Hyderabad, speaking at the City University of New York,

tolerance – was added to the preamble of the Constitution only after Indira Gandhi's infamous 'Emergency' ended in 1977.⁵ Given, then, that 'diversity' as we know it today in the context of political democracy is a relatively new phenomenon, why do women's activists still see the resulting 'complexity' as something *unbound* by the movements of history, in fact as something that always existed? Such assessments reveal to my mind more about *present* constructions of the past than they do about the past itself: more about the *present* nature of activist/ intellectual discourse than about the 'truth' of what was. 'Complexity,' after all, is a category of shifting references, and assuming that it has always existed in its present form is like saying – to use an example from Hindu ethnicist discourse that any activist would quickly refute – that Hindus and Muslims have indeed been arch enemies throughout Indian history, and for exactly the same reasons all along. And yet there is a sense in which this 'complexity' appears in activist accounts as a timeless encapsulation of ethnic diversity, or the true nature of Indian social reality which was until now suppressed or unseen.⁶ We might ask, then, what exactly constitutes this complexity – what movements, what events, and what particular perspectives over what others? Which aspects of diversity do activists seek to historicize, which remain suspended in timelessness, and why?

If an idea of 'complexity' is thus used to describe social reality, recognizing and coping with it also necessitates for activists a shift towards knowledge-consolidation and

April 26 1999.

⁵ A more detailed description of the Emergency and its specific effects on shaping Indian activism, follows in the next section of this paper.

⁶ I should note here again that I regard *both* religious and caste (specifically Dalit) groupings as forms of ethnic collectivities, for the simple reason that their self-definitions are predicated on notions of cultural boundedness and exclusive identity. I will explain the similarities further in the second half of this paper.

institution-building. In other words the emergence of ‘complexity’ has meant rethinking the very nature of women’s activism, and as such has played a significant role in forming institutions of study and research. What is it, then, about an institutional framework that enables a better view or a more in-depth understanding of ‘complexity’? Or, to ask the same question another way, what are the processes and pressures that *produce* this ‘complexity’ in the academic/institutional setting? How is social reality refracted through the institutional lens, and what new model(s) of activism is the resulting knowledge engineered to service?

These two sets of issues could be collapsed into two simple questions: the first dealing with how ‘complexity’ is constructed, and second with what ends such constructions serve. I hope to address these concerns by tracing the history of the women’s movement in Hyderabad from ‘women’s wings’ of Communist Party youth groups, to corporate institutions of research and activism; from street and slum to library and office suite. The promised history of “Stree Shakti” (the organization that preceded both Anveshi and Asmita) necessarily comes first, in the section that follows. All of my additions, and a specific analysis of the movement’s responses to ethnicism, appear in the second part of this paper.

part one the emerging culture of activism

one pre-Emergency activism: POW

The modern women’s activist organization has been shaped over time by the influences of several historical and intellectual movements, from 19th century social reform, to Maoist/Marxist revolution in the 1940s and 50s, to the rise of identity politics and the

emergence of ethnicism in the 1980s and 90s. But if 19th century movements provided an initial model for social reform, it was predominantly Maoist/Marxist ideology that first gave the modern women's movement its motivation, ideology, and its format. Nearly twenty years after Indian independence, and despite sweeping land reforms, feudalism had still not been dismantled, and slackening economic growth was fuelling the cynical view that the only ones to reap the rewards of *swaraj* (self rule) were capitalists, landlords and of course politicians. At the same time, the volatile spirits of revolution seemed to infuse the Indian atmosphere. Hyderabad had already witnessed the Telangana Armed Struggle against feudal zamindars and the Razakars, the notorious old guard of the Nizam's army, between 1948 and 1951.⁷ In West Bengal, an uprising of workers in the tea gardens of the northern countryside near Naxalbari would provide a name for several other communist uprisings in other parts of the country: 'Naxalism' remains synonymous to this day with communist revolution to some, and terrorist activity to others. In eastern Andhra Pradesh, the Srikakulam Girijan (tribal) struggle of the late 1960s, organized by the (then undivided) Communist Party of India (CPI), demanded an

⁷ The erstwhile state of Hyderabad was ruled, in British times, by the Asaf Jah dynasty, of which the Nizam Osman Ali Khan was the last ruler. When the future of the princely state was thrown into jeopardy by political developments at the national level, a para-military wing of the Majlis Ittehaad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM) known as the Razakars assumed the responsibility of guarding the boundaries of the State. Though the word 'razakar' means volunteer, the group gained notoriety in border regions for creating mini-regimes of terror. (A friend once described how his father and uncle had killed two Razakars who made threatening gestures towards their wives: 'their bodies were buried and a guava tree planted on top,' my friend continued, ' – and we have been eating the fruits ever since.') Hyderabad joined the Indian Union only after Operation Polo brought the Indian Army into the State in 1948. With the linguistic re-organization of states in 1956, the State of Hyderabad was trifurcated, and the Telangana region (to which the present-day city of Hyderabad belongs) joined Andhra Pradesh. The Telangana Armed Struggle that took place between 1948 and 51 was organized largely by the CPI, saw the Razakars, the landlords and later also the Indian army each in turn as enemies of the people, each representing the might and power of a still essentially oppressive, feudal state.

end to practices of extortion and land-grabbing by landlords and forest officials, marking perhaps the beginnings of the Naxalite movement in the state. Young radicals in Maharashtra's Dhule district formed a group called the Sharamik Sangatana (or Toilers Union), and organized tribals who had been dispossessed by Gujar landlords to get their lands back. Four thousand acres of land were returned to tribal control as a result of that agitation in the early 1970s. Again in Maharashtra, a rise in commodity prices brought on by conditions of drought and famine, led to the formation of the 'United Women's Anti Price Rise Front' under the auspices of the CPM (Communist Party-Marxist) and the Socialist Party. Eventually spreading to neighboring Gujarat, the agitation came to be known as the Nav Nirman movement, and was influenced greatly by Jai Prakash Narayan's concept of "total revolution": "fighting to reform as well as to limit State power, arguing that *rajniti* (State rule of law) had become corrupt ... and the time for *lokniti* (people's rule of law) had come."⁸ Narayan's ideas had great impact on students and organizers elsewhere in the country also: at a time when the State seemed to responded almost routinely to people's movements with force and violence. Narayan's own "Citizens for Democracy" movement strongly opposed what he saw as an increasingly dictatorial political system, by that time under Indira Gandhi.

Activist work in Hyderabad was centered on the grounds of the Osmania University campus, inspired to a large extent by perspectives and strategies developed elsewhere in the country. Some students had even left their colleges to participate in the Srikakulam Girijan Struggle, just as their Bengali counterparts did to go to Naxalbari. The Progressive Democratic Students' Union (PDSU) – a group with connections to the CPI –

⁸ Radha Kumar. *The History of Doing* (London: Verso 1993) 103.

was especially active on campus, organizing students for example around the Anti Price Rise issue in 1973. Associated with the PDSU were a group of six women, who had their first experience of participating in a wider struggle in the Anti Price Rise agitation, and who were beginning to feel the need for a separate group to address women's issues. As women they "discovered they had to face different barriers to their participation from the [men] – families who tried to hold them back, the weight of socially inculcated femininity which made it difficult for them to have self-confidence, the complete lack of understanding of the men in the movement about all these problems."⁹ In 1974, these women activists began discussing the need for a separate women's organization. Writes K.Lalita, herself a member of that group, "the principle response of male students was that it was anti-Marxist to have a separate women's organization; that women are not a class by themselves; that only an economic revolution would ultimately and automatically emancipate women..."¹⁰ These women students were reading in their classes everything from Marx and Marxist literature on the one hand to Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer on the other.¹¹ Their approach was overwhelmingly Leftist, but they saw no contradiction between the need for class revolution and the need to organize as women. The group that was formed in September of 1974, calling itself the Progressive Organization of Women (POW), in fact both separated and connected the oppressions of class and gender in their draft manifesto:

⁹ Gail Omvedt, *We will smash this prison: Indian women in struggle* (London: Zed Books 1980) 50. Omvedt is writing here specifically about the group in Hyderabad.

¹⁰ K.Lalita, "Women in revolt: a historical analysis of the POW" in *Women's Struggles and Strategies*, ed. Saskia Wieringa (Brookfield, Vermont: Gower Publishing Co.1988) 58.

¹¹ Also, as Lalita would later tell me, such titles as *Sandino's Daughters: testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, *Let me Speak! The Testimony of Domitila, a woman of the Bolivian Mines*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

“The majority of Indian women are slaves of slaves,” they wrote, “They are slaves to the men who are themselves slaves to this exploitative economic system. It is thus necessary that we women take a direct, leading role in organizing the masses of women in their struggles for a better life and a changed system.”¹²

And so emerged, out of the specific difficulties of being involved in a radical mass movement, what was perhaps the first autonomous women’s organization of the modern Indian women’s movement. As a loosely defined adjunct to the PDSU, the group had already begun work on women’s issues, and this continued with greater momentum for about a year after POW was formally established. The group organized against dowry, ‘eve-teasing’ or the harassment of women in public places, and embarked on a militant anti-obscenity campaign. They participated again with PDSU in a second series of Anti Price Rise protests, marching alongside women from Hyderabad slums, banging empty thalis (stainless steel plates) with spoons all the way. Holding all along that a strong women’s movement could not develop without a solid working-class base, the POW began a *Bastee* (slum) Services Committee to involve laboring women and address their

¹² Quoted in Omvedt 1980:50 (the POW’s entire draft manifesto is included in an Appendix to the volume). There are parallels here that we may note in passing: feminist consciousness in the United States of the 1960s also developed out of women’s experiences participating in new left movements. Writes Sara Evans, “women from the new left explained the sources of their new awareness by pointing to the discrepancy between the movement’s egalitarian ideology and the oppression they continued to experience within it” (*Personal Politics: the roots of women’s liberation in the civil rights movement and the new left* (New York: Knopf 1979) 220). Evans points out, however, that “the new left did more than simply perpetuate the oppression of women,” but that “even more importantly, it created new arenas – social space – within which women could develop a new sense of self-worth and independence; it provided new role models ... and allowed [women] to claim the movement’s ideology for themselves” (220). In the Indian context, the task for Hyderabad’s activists became one of distancing women’s issues from the paradigmatic control of Marxist thought – and so this kind of genealogical connection that Evans traces in the American context is also not often acknowledged as such, though it remains equally relevant.

specific needs. In several districts of the Telangana region, smaller POW organizing committees were soon formed, and at least one of these is still functioning (and was recently involved in the anti-arrack agitation that brought prohibition to Andhra Pradesh in 1992).

two the emergency

In the meantime, however, a crisis was slowly building in Indira Gandhi's government at the center. Student strikes and mass protests were rocking Gujarat and Bihar. Jai Prakash Narayan and Moraji Desai (Mrs. Gandhi's one-time colleague) had joined forces under the new Janata Morcha (People's Front), in protest of government corruption and Mrs. Gandhi's purported ineptitude. Then in June 1975, the Congress lost a crucial by-election in Gujarat (Desai's State), and around the same time Mrs. Gandhi was found guilty of electoral malpractice by the Allahabad High Court during her last Lok Sabha campaign. Rather than be forced to resign, under the advice of her younger son Sanjay, Mrs. Gandhi persuaded President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to declare a national Emergency.

Politically, this meant that almost every opposition leader was either jailed or kept under house-arrest, along with several prominent journalists, lawyers and educators. The press was severely censored. To tend to the country's poor economic numbers, Mrs. Gandhi then announced a "Twenty-point program" directed at reducing inflation, and punishing tax-evaders, smugglers and other 'real' criminals. Wages were frozen, and pressure applied in government enterprises to increase discipline and efficiency. Sanjay Gandhi – who held no public office at the time – was charged with the responsibility of monitoring newspaper leads and editorials, and himself initiated a birth-control program that required

sterilization for all families with two or more children.¹³ On the economic front, things began to look up: prices came down, and production indexes were rising dramatically. Perhaps because of these economic gains, or perhaps because Mrs. Gandhi knew she would eventually be forced to seek electoral mandate for her policies, she called elections in 1977. Both she and her son Sanjay lost their bids for Lok Sabha seats, and a Janata Party government was formed with Desai once again at the helm.

In India today, most people seem to remember the Emergency as the period when all the trains ran on time. Some remember getting ready to be sterilized, as per the requirements of Sanjay Gandhi's birth-control program, but few among the middle-classes recall fear, despair or facing any more than the usual levels of difficulty. Even politicians in the opposition regard their time in jail as a not-too-trying rite of passage that marks them now as veterans of sorts, linked by the experience of incarceration to other nationalist leaders jailed arbitrarily by the British. For student leaders, protestors and other activists associated with Leftist Parties, however, the twenty months under Emergency rule were anything but normal. The CPI-M/L (Marxist-Lenninist) was one of twenty-six political parties and groups banned by the government under Emergency policy. Since nearly all members of the POW were by that time card-holding members of the M/L Party, they too became the targets of police suspicion. Charged with being a front for a much larger underground organization, POW members were intimidated, and at least three arrested for no apparent reason by the beginning of 1976 under MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act). Jumping bail or anticipating arrests, several POW and PDSU activists

¹³ Interestingly, Sanjay Gandhi's was a program that targeted men (requiring vasectomies for men with more than two children) rather than women. This fact is not often

went underground with the support of the Party, leaving homes and families overnight and disappearing for nearly two years to safe-houses or travelling to the North, where they could not be easily recognized or found.

three

post-Emergency activism: Stree Shakti Sanghatana

It would be well-near impossible for me to describe here the impact of the Emergency arrests on the women activists involved without myself adding (perhaps unnecessary) flavor to the description. Suffice it to say therefore that the experiences of the Emergency changed lives and altered relationships to such an extent that POW could never again come together as an organization. But the fact that POW did in fact have a post-Emergency successor – a group called Stree Shakti Sanghatana or Stree Shakti for short – brings me to a larger, more theoretical question that needs to be posed at this juncture: what was the impact of the Emergency on the future of social activism? There is a fair amount of literature on the Emergency itself: on the Constitutional/Legal aspects, the political repercussions, Sanjay Gandhi's birth-control program, and even on police tactics and treatment of prisoners during that period, but nothing – quite surprisingly – on activism, even though activists as a group were among the most affected by Emergency crack-downs. Addressing such a question properly, then, would require that I undertake a research project of a very different character than what I have here begun, so I offer only a few preliminary thoughts as a means of tracing the links between pre-Emergency POW and post-Emergency Stree Shakti.

remembered, though virtually all population control programs since that time have focused predictably on supplying birth control (hormonal contraceptives over devices) to women.

The most substantial and significant fallout of the Emergency was a virtual burgeoning of Civil Liberties work all over the country. Most Civil Rights/ Civil Liberties organizations functioning in India today have their origins during or around that period.¹⁴ From the APCDRC¹⁵ (a precursor of the APCLC¹⁶) formed in response to State repression of the Srikakulam struggle, to the PUCL/PUDR¹⁷ convened in Delhi at the height of the Emergency by Narayan and other members of the opposition; from people's groups in Assam and down to Kerala, the most stunning effect of the Emergency seemed to be a deepening consciousness about civil and democratic rights. In May 1977, the Janata government appointed Ret'd. Chief Justice J.C. Shah as the head of a committee to investigate excesses and malpractices carried out during (or just prior to) the Emergency. The month before, Narayan (functioning as President of his 'Citizens for Democracy' group) had already appointed a committee to investigate "encounter" deaths in Andhra Pradesh that occurred during the same time. The Tarkunde Committee, as it came to be known (after its head, V.M.Tarkunde), was comprised of nine lawyers, journalists, and civil rights activists, four of whom were from Hyderabad.¹⁸ Amongst these members was K.G. Kannabiran, a lawyer with an interest in civil liberties, already well-known by the time for his work on "extra-judicial" killings in the Srikakulam struggle, and poised to begin pleading a series of sedition and conspiracy cases lodged against revolutionary

¹⁴ The first Indian Civil Rights Union was formed much earlier of course in 1936 in the context of anti-colonial civil disobedience movements. The modern Civil Liberties movement begins, however, only around the time of the Emergency.

¹⁵ Andhra Pradesh Civil and Democratic Rights Convention

¹⁶ Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee

¹⁷ People's Union for Civil Liberties/ People's Union for Democratic Rights

¹⁸ V.M.Tarkunde (President); Nabakrishna Choudari (Orissa); M.V.Ramamurthy (Hyderabad); Kaloji Narayana Rao (Warangal, AP); Balwant Reddy (Hyderabad); K.Pratap Reddy (Hyderabad); K.G.Kannabiran (Hyderabad); B.G.Verghese (Delhi) and Arun Shourie (Delhi).

activists and writers of the Left. Above all else, and especially to the growing community of civil rights activists represented by such figures as Kannabiran, the Emergency provided irrefutable evidence of the repressive nature of State apparatus. Although the PDSU/POW combine had directed some of its ire against government and the 'ruling classes' – an approach very much in keeping with its Leftist leanings – the events of the Emergency shifted the focus from corruption and government hypocrisy to outright repression. The context, in the months after elections were called, was one of concentrated civil liberties activism. And the focus of *all* activist attention was the State, understood now as an inherently repressive body. So subversive were activist attitudes towards the State, that when a judge asked K.G.Kannabiran how Naxalites could lay claim to their civil rights when they rejected the Constitution themselves, the lawyer replied "in such circumstances it is not *their* beliefs which are on trial, but *ours*."¹⁹

Around the same time as the Tarkunde Committee began functioning, other activists who had been jailed or had gone underground were beginning work once again, and many of them with the APCLC. And so from this work and these associations, through husbands sometimes or through friends, another group of women came together in 1978 to form Stree Shakti Sanghatana.²⁰ The context of civil liberties activism from which the group

¹⁹ Quoted in Sitharamam Kakarala, "Civil Rights Movement in India," unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (Surat: Center for Social Studies 1993) 301 (emphasis added).

²⁰ "Stree Shakti Sanghatana" does not lend itself well to translation. Literally it means "Women – Power – Organization." The group included Lalita, who had been President of POW; Uma Maheshwari, who approached the group first in need of help herself and now works on issues of women's health; Rama Melkote, a political science lecturer at Osmania University, and Lalita's one-time teacher; Vasanth Kannabiran, who taught English at Reddy College (the Kannabirans' daughter Kalpana would later also join the group); Veena Shatruguna, a physician with the National Institute for Nutrition in Hyderabad; Susie J. Tharu, who taught at the Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages; D.Vasantha, a speech therapist at Osmania University. Several others would come and go over the years. Those named here continue to live and work (as activists) in Hyderabad.

emerged stamped Stree Shakti as a post-Emergency formation in this important sense. Its activism, although gender-based, would remain almost exclusively State-focussed for some years to come.²¹

The impact of the Emergency is evident also from the changed relationship of the women's organization to the M/L Party and to the broader Left community. Activists seem to have been well aware that Party connections were what landed the POW in so much trouble during the Emergency. Writes K. Lalita, "without taking into consideration the preparedness of the women [cadres] to participate in political struggle, [the POW] exposed itself to repression by regularly associating with left-wing student organizations, which gave [the agents of state power] an excuse to intimidate the POW members ... Ultimately by going underground and becoming 'illegal,' the main organizers of POW attracted even more repression ... when the organization was still too weak to withstand this assault. This was the reason for its disintegration during and after the Emergency"²²

²¹ In the North American context too feminist consciousness was shaped in no small measure by women's participation in Civil Rights struggles. Sara Evans links even the emergence of mainstream white feminism with struggles for human rights and racial equality: "the lessons of the NAACP and its legal defense arm were not lost on the women who founded NOW: to adult professional women in the early 1960s the growth of civil rights insurgency provided a model of legal activism ... [T]he sweeping critique of sexual roles that characterized the more radical women's liberation movement of the late sixties first developed from within the ranks, and the revolt, of young southern blacks." (1979:25). Far more obvious, however, is the connection between the civil rights movement and the emergence of Black feminist politics. I quote from the statement of the Combahee River Collective that tellingly echoes the views and sentiments of one-time POW members, as that of others closely associated with Party politics: "Many of us were active in [civil rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers], and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist ... and antisexist..." (in *This Bridge Called My Back: writings by radical women of color* ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table 1981) 211).

²² K.Lalita 1988:67.

So if a break with Party politics had not been crucial in pre-Emergency days, it was crucial now, for an activism based on women's issues could not function according to Party dictates or under what had amounted before to Party supervision. Members of Stree Shakti were clearly aware that the Party, in spite of its claims to the contrary, had not been internally democratic: it had marginalized women and gender-specific concerns, and privileged those occupying leadership positions over the general cadre. In an effort to distance itself from Party work and Party formations, then, Stree Shakti decided deliberately to avoid mass organization, which would inevitably 'absorb and neutralize' the very concerns that the group sought to address. Members opted instead to keep the group small, with "a loose structure where all women could work according to their capacities": a necessary move equally because all members had their own jobs and careers (many as teachers and educators) to balance alongside activism.²³ Further, to avoid any other form of external control, the group decided *not* to seek funds from outside sources. This meant that for the seven odd years that Stree Shakti was active, funds for its upkeep came mostly from group members, with a small component given by donations (on which also there was a Rs.100 cap). Stree Shakti members then consciously attempted to ensure that the group functioned as democratically as possible, leaving no-one out of decision-making processes.²⁴ The group had two halves, as it were: one English-speaking, vocal and articulate, and the other Telugu-speaking and somewhat

²³ Vasanth Kannabiran 1986:602.

²⁴ Perhaps obviously, this attempt at egalitarianism was not built on the concept of 'sisterhood' that once characterized White feminist discourse. Nor was it directly a reply to that notion, though other Indian activists have lent their voices too to that critique. Drawing on the Latino concept of "compañera" ("companionship or partnership"), María Lugones has suggested a notion of 'pluralist friendship' as an alternative model that I believe more closely approximates that on which Stree Shakti was formed, although not quite so self-consciously ("Sisterhood and friendship as feminist models" in *Feminism and Community* ed. Penny A.



Figure 2: *An ideal of feminist interaction: this sketch (by Lydia Victor) was published in a special August 1981 issue of Olympus magazine edited by the Stree Shakti collective, just shortly after the group's formation.*

more quiet. Again, anxious not to allow language-barriers to become either impediments to group participation or the implements of dominance, all conversations that took place in English were scrupulously translated into Telugu, and eventually discussions naturally took place in a comfortable mixture of both languages.²⁵

Weiss and Marilyn Friedman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1995) 135-45). The 'company of women,' to borrow Sara Suleri's (nostalgic) words describing an characteristic feature of domestic life in the subcontinent, gave Stree Shakti its twin rationales of looseness and of egalitarianism in the context of political struggle. "Compañera," continues Lugones, "can be and is used in hierarchies ... although there is some tension there. The term is most at home in an egalitarian political companionship where everyone shares the rights and burdens of political struggle" (134). But as the "rights and burdens" could never entirely be evenly distributed in service to the egalitarian ideal, the feminist model of friendship would have to be modified too in Stree Shakti's case, as we shall soon see.

²⁵ While this was true of discussions, however, the tension between languages has never entirely disappeared: there has always been, to lesser or greater extents, a palpable hierarchy of languages. Predictably, English has retained its position of dominance and privilege and giving English-speakers – and later also those fluent in theoretical vocabularies of various kinds – an edge, a greater visibility, and an authority, all of which are often the sources of much discomfort and sometimes also of conflict. In an attempt to bridge these kinds of gulfs, Anveshi would later set up a Telugu Materials Production Committee, to undertake translations of important theoretical works from their original English into Telugu. Sometime before this, ex-POW member Gita Ramaswamy also established the Hyderabad Book Trust (HBT), explicitly for the purposes of translating important books on a variety of subjects from other Indian and foreign languages into Telugu. Although at the time of its formation, the HBT explicitly intended to reach a wider (Communist) Party audience (as a means of educating the cadre to fight Party oppressions), it continues its work today I believe with a broader purpose, complementing the work done by the Anveshi Committee.

Yet the break with the Party was not, and indeed could not have been, a clean one: Party politics may have been rejected as exclusionary and undemocratic, but Marxist ideology remained *the* source of inspiration and sustenance for activism. As two Stree Shakti members would later write, “our proximity to the Left provided us with analytical tools and a broader political perspective that many of us felt was invaluable for our growth ...[we] looked towards the progressive Left sections for support, and were extremely anxious to emphasize the *Marxist* component in our Marxist-feminist approach...”²⁶ As a result, Stree Shakti activists eventually found themselves under considerable pressure to support any and all issues “publicly articulated in a manner with which we fully concur” – be these agrarian or environmental movements, or other people’s struggles (such as those emerging in Bhopal after the Union Carbide leak), that may or may not have had anything specifically to do with women or gender issues.²⁷ Refusing to become involved in such wider movements meant being branded anti-Marxist or bourgeois. “Attempts to co-opt us,” the activists would complain, “have alternated with attempts to decry us.”²⁸ The emancipatory potential of Leftist ideology in practice was clearly a limiting factor, and the tension between Marxism and feminism could only complicate other matters: “when women with rightist assumptions came into the group in its early stages, we were troubled not only by their disruptive influence on the group but also about the image we would present to the public – our public being, of course, the Left.”²⁹ For years after its

²⁶ Vasanth Kannabiran and Veena Shatruguna, “The relocation of political practice – The Stree Shakti Sanghatana Experience” in *Lokayan Bulletin* 4/6 (1986) 25, 24.

²⁷ V.Kannabiran and Shatruguna 1986:26.

²⁸ V.Kannabiran and Shatruguna 1986:26.

²⁹ V.Kannabiran and Shatruguna 1986:25; V. Kannabiran 1986:602. Somewhat tangentially, we might ask what are the “rightist assumptions” mentioned in the above quotation? I raise this question here so as to problematize any taken-for-granted understanding of the “right,” but will return to the issue later on in this paper.

formation, then. Stree Shakti would feel the twin pressures of its ambiguous relationship to the Left: on the one hand being watched, monitored, and urged at times to return to the “correct path” and on the other justifying itself, its actions, and its perspectives to friends and associates in Leftist groups.³⁰

four campaigns

Different members of Stree Shakti have written about the campaigns the group took up over the years, so I do not reproduce an exhaustive account of those here, but draw attention instead to that published body of work.³¹ My aim in this section is to provide something of an overview of Stree Shakti’s activities, but more importantly to highlight the evolution of the group’s perspectives: the parallel movements from grassroots activism to research and documentation, from ‘loose’ organization to formal/corporate institution.

Beyond its relationship to the intellectual and political Left, Stree Shakti saw its role fairly simply. “in the field of propaganda and conscientization,” to publicize and politicize women’s issues.³² But which issues were women’s issues? Clearly rape was

³⁰ Cf. V. Kannabiran 1986:601-2. In September 1998, when a one-time Stree Shakti member was made President of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee – now a group with openly Naxalite sympathies and with clear M/L Party backing – some activists joked that they had always wondered who the ‘plant’ from the Left was, and now they knew. Party connections are not of much importance to activist groups any longer, although affiliations clearly still matter as indications of personal politics.

³¹ See Susie Tharu and Rama Melkote, “An investigative Analysis of Working Women’s Hostels in India” in *Signs* 9/1 (Autumn 1983) 164-71; V.Kannabiran 1986; V.Kannabiran and Shatruguna 1986; Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran, “Looking at ourselves: the women’s movement in Hyderabad” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge 1997) 259-79.

³² V.Kannabiran and Shatruguna 1986:24. Sara Evans writes of incipient feminist activism in 1967 Chicago: “In typical new left style their first impulse was to get the word

one. In 1975 a verdict was handed down in the 'Mathura Rape case': the two policemen accused of raping the fourteen year-old Mathura were acquitted because the rape was determined to be "consensual intercourse." Stree Shakti did not come together specifically to rally around this case, as did several other groups: Vimochana (Bangalore), for example, and the Forum Against Rape (which would later call itself the Forum Against the Oppression of Women, Mumbai). But when the group began functioning in 1978, case on case of police rape or other forms of custodial rape were coming to light, and the group almost naturally converged on those, in part because they were working with other groups to lobby for amendments in Rape Law³³, but more I think because it enabled a critical focus on the State. In the group's own words, "...here the "battle lines" were already so clearly drawn. [In] other cases of rape and gang rape, we found it difficult to articulate the question of rape and its implications publicly. *Our background and our political connections made it almost mandatory to focus on police violence ...* Police or custodial rape was an issue that had already been articulated for us in a political context, whereas ordinary rape seemed an issue fraught with misunderstandings with which we were not yet ready to deal..."³⁴

out, expose the situation – women's oppression – and call on women to mobilize..." (1979:199).

³³ Specifically, the amendments being sought were as follows: "...to include specified punishments for rape of a wife during separation, rape by a public servant, by a superintendent of a jail, and by hospital staff. The amendments would also hold all participants in a gang rape liable ... shift the burden of proof to the accused in cases of custodial rape or rape of minors ... [disallow] the use of the victim's past sexual history, except where relating to the accused, in the trial" (V.Kannabiran 1986:605).

³⁴ Vasantha Kannabiran 1986:605 (emphasis added).

Other issues clearly identified as gender-based were family violence, dowry death³⁵, and contraception. On family violence, Stree Shakti wrote and produced a film with director Deepa Dhanraj, titled *Idi katha maatramena? (Is this only a story?)*, and around the same time also developed a play on the subject for street performance. The group's involvement in cases of dowry death led to the formation of the Dowry Death Investigation Committee, an adjunct group established largely in an attempt to allow other women not directly part of Stree Shakti or uncomfortable with the group's political perspectives, to contribute their strengths and their energies to the effort. In reality, however, women not directly part of the Stree Shakti core group were always involved in one campaign or another; the group's functional 'looseness' allowed easily for such outside participation.

But if the inclusion of different perspectives within Stree Shakti allowed the group to adopt a wider range of strategies and tackle a wider range of issues, it did not ultimately alter the largely State-focussed nature of the group's activism. This is not to say that Stree Shakti deliberately drew all its 'battle lines' in opposition to the State; rather that the State invariably appeared among the final objects of feminist critique. In cases of dowry deaths, for example, much attention was focussed to be sure on the family as the site of violence against women. But these were equally cases of murder dressed up to look like accidents or suicides, attracting therefore very little police attention and foreclosing any real possibility of prosecuting the victim's family (affines) for the crime.

³⁵ 'Dowry death' refers to the killing of young married women when demands for more dowry from her family are not met. Husbands and parents-in-law are often involved, and the murders made to look like kitchen accidents or suicides. Dowry deaths first came to the attention of women's groups in cities like Delhi, when it was noticed that a great many

If the State was not this time the direct perpetrator of violence, its personnel and its machinery were certainly complicit with those responsible for the deaths of the women involved. To take up a case of dowry death, then, was to collide headlong with both the patriarchal family and the patriarchal state. Interestingly, a similar perspective emerged from the campaign against the use of the injectable contraceptive Net-Oen (Norethisterone Enanthate). What began as a journey to Patancheru (just outside Hyderabad) to stop a scheduled drug trial among rural women would end with an understanding of contraception and family planning as tools of State population control programs. It became clear that government initiatives were driven less by a concern for women's rights, and more by dire predictions of 'population explosion' in the subcontinent; that they were less concerned with assisting in individual family planning decisions than with implementing aggressive population control measures. As Susie Tharu would later comment, the campaign led the group to the argument that "there is *no* contraceptive that is a feminist contraceptive."³⁶ Assisted by the Delhi-based Saheli, Stree Shakti, five medical doctors and a freelance journalist with an interest in women's health joined forces to file a writ in the Supreme Court to prevent further Net-Oen testing in India. Their efforts yielded tangible results: further testing of Net-Oen and Depo Provera (both injectables) was banned.³⁷

'accidental deaths' of young women were being reported, with no further explanation or investigation of the incidents.

³⁶ Interview with Susie Tharu, August 12 1998.

³⁷ Years later, feminists would again become involved in a very similar campaign – similar arguments for the urgent need for contraceptives, and similar arguments opposing it – when Norplant devices were introduced in India. Clearly, the battle had to be fought one company or one device at a time.

Such perspectives as I am describing may appear commonsensical to us now, but they were anything but self-evident at the time. And they would become indelible in feminist praxis. If the State was no longer easily identified as *the* enemy, it remained still one among many powerfully inimical forces with which women (and women's groups) had to contend. In the context of the continuing Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, activist groups never really lost sight of the overtly repressive character of the Indian State that made its first appearance in Naxalbari, Srikakulam and then again in the Emergency. But they would additionally come to identify the State and state ideology with other, more covert, systems of oppression: patriarchy, religion and caste. How did such perspectives develop? I would argue that this was part of a growing trend in feminist activism to see all issues as women's issues on one level or another, and each social concern as fundamentally linked to myriad others. Looking back at the 1978 Anti-Vegetable Export Campaign, for example, it becomes clear that such an integrative approach was not always part of feminist politics. Failed rains were driving food prices skywards, and yet vegetable exports to the Middle-East were continuing unabated. A wider forum of activist groups and the women's wings of some political parties rallied immediately around the issue, but Stree Shakti – at first in any case – had reservations about joining this campaign. The central question for the group was this: *Was vegetable export a women's issue at all?*³⁸ It is difficult to say what exactly may have resolved Stree Shakti's doubts at the time, but in retrospect activists do not hesitate to name the

³⁸ And related to this question, also whether involvement in the campaign would only reinforce the popular view of women as consumers. It bears mentioning that these sorts of concerns were named at least once before, during the Maharashtrian Anti Price Rise campaigns of the early 70s: why should food and food prices be specifically women's concerns, when both men and women have to eat? Should this be a women's agitation, or

vegetable export issue as *obviously* a concern for women. As vendors running businesses in competition with wealthier individuals or partnerships, *and* as consumers responsible for managing household budgets and buying vegetables for daily meals, women would have been among the most acutely affected or burdened by vegetable shortages in the country. There was no question that such apparently unrelated things as international exports, national economic policies and women's daily lives were in reality intimately linked.

In part of course the emergence of integrated approaches were products of Stree Shakti's Marxist heritage, that at the very least discerned the mutually constitutive nature of 'economy' and 'society.' If Stree Shakti began with the assumption that the oppressions of gender could not be collapsed with those of class, the group moved eventually towards a greater understanding of gender oppression as the specific product of the collusions of power on multiple levels, and not just as an incidental outcome of traditional practice. In this emerging discourse, the 'State' – increasingly now a conceptual category rather than a literal reference to the police – became a device that *enabled* an integrated approach, while itself remaining a primary object of critique. The character of state-focussed activism was markedly different from what it had originally been, although its direction remained very much the same.

five **the politics of personal struggle**

Militant, radical, articulate and visible, it was not long before the name 'Stree Shakti' was synonymous with women's activism in Hyderabad. Stree Shakti members now

should it not involve men also? What kind of images of women would such movements be projecting, if only women were to get involved?

remember, their amusement touched with incredulity, people arriving at their doorsteps in the early mornings with some concern or some new case, demanding immediate attention. Or dashing off for a few hours to pursue a case, and returning before the morning was over to classrooms and careers. The group would meet after work for a brief conference and then disperse, often to police stations, investigating or following up one case or another. When they finally reached home again at ten or later, husbands would be pacing outside, young children waiting within.

Of course the development of a more integrated approach in feminist activism did not mean that Stree Shakti could – or would – get involved in every issue it came across on the logic that *somehow* it *must* have specific implications for women. By the group's own admission the area of women's oppression was gray and uncharted, and the directions of Stree Shakti's activist work were never entirely fixed. I make this last remark not to criticize, but to draw attention to a set of unresolved – and indeed perhaps unresolvable – questions that would eventually lead to the group's dissolution in the mid-eighties. Lines already quoted earlier in this paper are worth repeating in this context: “how much longer can we keep on with wife-beating, dowry death, and rape? Should we set up crisis centers to help? ... should we be a social service or a political organization?” Other questions about theorizing, reflecting, documenting, and deciding how much of a component each of these should be in political activism, were also persistent concerns – naturally, for a group of women who were themselves college-level teachers with research interests of their own. The central question – *what kind of group should Stree Shakti be?* – was one never fully answered to the very end. To some extent, it could not have been fully answered: there were no precedents, after all, no tested and tried models

to work with for Indian feminism at the time, and much uncertainty about the exact nature of work the group would be involved with. Activism just had to be devised and learned along the way. Each member was to contribute according to her capacity, in time, money, and effort, and the group was to remain a “loose” aggregate rather than a formal institution. But if organizational “looseness” enabled a much-needed flexibility, it also effectively was a rejection of any comprehensive attempt at group definition. And this factor would, in time, begin to pose some specific difficulties.

In the absence of formal decisions on agenda, which issues and which campaigns would Stree Shakti decide to take up? Would they get involved with movements as far removed from Hyderabad as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (a movement against the damming of the Narmada River in Maharashtra) and the incipient struggles in Bhopal? How in any case would they relate to those and other movements in the country, and indeed in the world? In Hyderabad itself, on what basis would they choose one rape victim or one case of dowry death over another? And then, once they became involved, how far would this involvement go – and what did they expect to come out of it? For all their energy and enthusiasm, the group was frequently left with little sense of achievement. In 1978, for example, the group got involved with Rameeza Bee’s case – possibly one of Hyderabad’s most publicised police-rape cases – but the constant media attention and virtual harassment eventually led Rameeza to withdraw the case and claim that the rape never took place. The case was eventually tried (and the accused policemen acquitted) but Rameeza Bee’s modified stance came as a blow to the group. Who or what were they representing – and at what cost was their activism forged? There were also those families who merely wanted the group to get jewelry back from estranged in-laws, or parents who

wanted their daughters kidnapped from husbands' homes. How was the group to limit the reach of its activism, and where was it to draw the lines? And then, after all was said and done, what would be left, what would be the outcome of all this ceaseless activity?

There were other concerns too, these less theoretical in nature. Although Stree Shakti's organizational 'looseness' allowed for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and differences of opinion, the group operated – necessarily – on the readily given informal consensus of its small core-group of six. But 'consensus' operates both to include and to exclude, and if there were new members who found within the group all the possibilities their lives otherwise disallowed, there were an equal number who gained from it only a lasting discomfort. What drew women to Stree Shakti, and what then compelled or repelled them? Did the group really allow for the expression of a diversity of positions? Along what lines was Stree Shakti developing, and what was its scope for growth and advancement? "The challenge that any movement provides to the individual," Vasanth Kannabiran would write, "is measured perhaps in terms of personal growth. When one begins to feel that there is no longer any scope for growth in certain kinds of action, then where does one go? If we as a group continue to act without broadening our perspective, then what is the price?"³⁹

Stree Shakti's approach to such questions as emerged from its work is reflected, I believe, in the phrase used to frame its discussions at the time: "the politics of personal struggle." Under this heading was placed everything from activists' individual accounts of struggle and growth with and within the group, to speculations on why some women may have felt uncomfortable, to broader theoretical understandings of what constitutes the realm of

the “personal” and how it should be the primary locus of women’s activism. This was the first time Stree Shakti as a group – deeply self-conscious in some ways from the very outset – sought to re-examine and re-cast itself in the context of the new questions and new difficulties it was increasingly having to face. As such the discussions on the “politics of personal struggle” mark a turning point for the group, the start of a much longer process of articulating and re-articulating the need for a modified activism. Consider for example Susie Tharu’s characteristically eloquent delineation of the “personal” as it figures in even the most mundane of social issues: water. I quote at some length from a talk she gave at the start of the Third World Women’s Film Festival, held in Hyderabad in January of 1986:

If we consider the women’s question as it has been legitimated today, it has by and large been legitimated at levels which exclude the personal. Let me explain. Most people – politicians, planners, social workers – would agree that water is a women’s issue. They would also agree that price and the availability of food is a women’s issue. Or, let me put it another way, and there is a distinction – that water is an important issue for women since women are primarily responsible for the household economy. In fact I’d say that today to speak about women and water, to organize women to demand for water, would by and large be regarded a laudable thing. What the world would seem to be saying is please work on the issue of water, on the issue of price rise. If you do that, the chances are that you will stay within the *traditional articulation of the problem*. [W]hat you will *not* ask what does a scarcity of water mean in terms of a woman’s time, her work, her health, the amount of water she herself gets. Who is it who will wash her clothes less often, forgo a bath, and perhaps even a drink if there is less to go around? Who is the only one skilled enough to scour the pans when there’s a shortage of water, who re-organizes her life to make sure she is at the communal tap on time, who keeps her ears constantly perked for the trickle that will start at night? Who is held responsible for the new tensions in the family? Whose are the friendships jeopardized in the long, tiring queues at the tap? What does an economy of water centered on her show us? How do we estimate the cost of all this and how does it change the way we pose the question of water, the way we estimate its value or the criteria for its allocation? How can this knowledge be built into the politics of water? And who does it? I have yet to see something written or said about water which reckons with the problem of what water is for women, and what its

³⁹ V.Kannabiran 1986:612

political dimensions become when women are included in an analysis of the question.⁴⁰

For my present purposes, there are at least two points worth highlighting from this passage. First, the need for a radical, *non*-traditional articulation of women's issues, and the idea that such articulation involves locating feminist praxis in the domain of the "personal." But which is this domain? For Tharu the "personal" is not identical to something we might call the "private": it does not merely include the domains of marriage, family, sexuality; and it is not even just the container of those innumerable details of a woman's daily routine that make water a women's issue. For Tharu, the "personal" is that domain which is bound and gagged as it were by the codes and conventions of a society, that realm of experience that is "beyond the pale of the polite or even acceptable ... [that is locked] into a sullen silence, inarticulate, inarticulable" (2). It is a domain which operates, she continues, "as Foucault has so convincingly shown, not by prohibiting a topic, but by focussing ... an excessive purient attention on it"; by "inciting an elaborate, "secret" discourse, perhaps a confessional statement, which serves to translate the problem into the exact proportions through which power is able to maintain its hold..." (2). So it is here, in such silenced and policed domains "that have traditionally been relegated to the realm of the personal" (4) that feminist politics should locate itself, if it is to be truly radical.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Susie Tharu, "The Politics of Personal Struggle" in *Women Take One (Beginning of a dialogue in the third World Women's Film Festival 1986)* ed. Abha Bhaiya and Sheba Chhachhi (Delhi: Jagori 1986) 2. Further references are incorporated into the text.

⁴¹ We might note in passing that such a re-formulated notion of the "personal" is of course part of what enables feminists to now look back on the Anti-Vegetable Export campaign and state unequivocally that vegetable export was a women's issue, indeed for many more reasons than they could have enunciated at the time.

I have suggested thus far that this perspective emerges at a time when Stree Shakti is discovering and confronting the boundaries of its activism, wondering perhaps about what has concretely emerged from all the years of work. I might add now that if the group grew dissatisfied with its own methods or approaches, this was *not* because its work within the larger Indian Women's movement had achieved no concrete results: "One must acknowledge," writes Tharu, "that in the last seven or eight years, as a result of a great deal of effort through campaigns about the Rape Bill, about dowry deaths, about family violence, about media depictions of women, and the subtle exclusion of women from development programs, *perceptions have altered*. The "suicides" so common among young wives, for instance, are no longer simply attributed to their inability to adjust or to their arrogance. No longer is this perceived as merely a *personal* problem. Considered in itself, or in terms of its immediate payoff, this is indeed a major achievement" (1-2, my italics). Why, we might ask then, is this time of success – when the women's movement is beginning to reap the fruits of its labor, when the work of women's groups and other NGOs is being appreciated, considered 'laudable' – why is this equally a time of virtual crisis for Stree Shakti? Why at this specific juncture should Stree Shakti seek to question itself, and to articulate a new radical feminist praxis?

Again, Tharu provides us only with a partial answer: she writes, "unless we understand the shift [in public perceptions] for what it is, unless, in other words, we are able to characterize fairly accurately what it implies for the goals of the [women's] movement, we are soon going to be disappointed, for it may not deliver what it appears to promise"

(2). Caution born perhaps of past experience prevents too much celebration, in other

words, and makes activists anxious about the future goals of the movement. As such it prompts the crucial question ‘where do we go from here?’

The answer of course depends mostly on where ‘here’ is. Elsewhere in her talk, Tharu echoes a sentiment voiced by many in Stree Shakti at the time (and in the wider women’s movement) when she names the present moment as one when reflection is most apt. Reflection on what? Maybe for a start on the advances of feminist struggles, on the status of their achievements; maybe on which perceptions have altered and how; and on the “nature of the powers we have to confront, and the diverse places in which their armies are arrayed” (2). There is a need for the protests and marches and letter-writing campaigns of the last seven or eight years to give way to thoughts and summaries and assessments of work done during that period. For without that, it will be difficult to know exactly where ‘here’ is. This said, we might note (secondly) from Tharu’s comments quoted above, that feminist knowledge about the ‘here’ – although incomplete – is certainly not non-existent. What the activists do know, and what fuels their anxiety to a large degree is that the ‘here’ of women’s activism is a space legitimated by none other than ‘politicians, planners, and social workers,’ those very representatives of government and bureaucracy who have thus far been, in one form or another, *the* object of activist critique. The same feminist praxis which once was considered radical now becomes acceptable and even “traditional,” bearing testimony to the success of the women’s movement. This success, however, also throws women’s activists into a deeply unsettling collusion with the powers that be, compelling them therefore – for the first of many times to come – to seek out new sites for an activism which must at all costs remain radical.

It is at this juncture that Stree Shakti ceases its (“traditional”) activist work and becomes a Resource Center for Women’s Studies called “Anveshi,” which appropriately means ‘search’ or ‘quest’. Anveshi is formed, if I may summarize, from a radical activism that has to refashion itself to remain radical. from the “politics of personal struggle,” from a discourse of crisis, through a discourse of transition, *and*, I would add, by an emerging discourse of complexity. For what is the “politics of personal struggle” if not an acknowledgement of the contested terrains of feminist praxis, if not an effort to cope with the reticence of some women as opposed to the enthusiasm of others, if not an attempt to draw the battle-lines again, except this time by understanding that sexuality or marriage or family are not entities uniformly defined but are each a nexus of shifting power-relations that bind and release, silence and express. ‘Complexity’ begins to emerge in activist discourse when a liberal State and a liberal society accept the brutal reality of dowry death and make it a crime, understand the horror of custodial rape and make it a crime, but refuse to look any farther: “you can do anything you like to a woman, this means, so long as you don’t beat her – or burn her of course” (3). The liberal articulation of such issues is equally what Tharu calls “traditional” (3); so complexity emerges when activist use of the language of liberalism has reaped some of its rewards and found some of its limits, and State use of the language of liberalism powerfully takes over. “The whole politics of the family in which questions of dowry deaths ought to be framed; the politics of sexuality and power from which the problematics of rape take on a rationality, the politics of marriage, which is different from the politics of the family, in the light of which we have to understand wife-beating...” (3) – these are the complex excluded realms of the “personal” in which a revived radical activism must locate itself.

six
incidental details

The “politics of personal struggle” represents only a brief phase of Stree Shakti’s history. but a crucial one. if only because it was a phase of transition. It would be glamorous of course to think of this period as defined exclusively by ideological shifts and intellectual growth, but clearly it was also a time when personal life intervened as never before. On the one hand, were the interests of career. and professional growth and advancement. In some sense, “Anveshi” had already begun functioning years before the idea for such a center was born. in the form of a research project on the life stories of the women who took part in the Telangana Armed Struggle between 1948 and 1951. The result was a book – ‘*We were making history... ’ Life stories of women in the Telangana People’s Struggle* – Stree Shakti’s best known work, and an important contribution to the field of women’s history.⁴² For Stree Shakti, living and working in urban areas of the same Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, this project was in no small measure genealogical. The group would write that the histories of those other women “constituted, as it were, the basis of our attempt to recover for ourselves a tradition of struggle”; that it represented a means to “reclaim a past and celebrate a lineage of resistance and growth, for to be deprived of a past is to inherit an impoverished present and a future sealed off from change.”⁴³

Somewhat ironically, however, working on the Telangana book – and a second project to ‘Indianize’ and translate into Telugu *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, brought out years before by

⁴² Stree Shakti Sanghatana, ‘*We were making history... ’ Life stories of women in the Telangana People’s Struggle* (New Delhi: Kali for Women 1989). The book was also published in London by Zed Books, introducing Stree Shakti to an international audience as well.

the Boston Women's Health Collective⁴⁴ – seems to have kindled more of an interest in writing *about* struggle than in shaping struggle from the ground, more of an interest in women's studies and the behind-the-scenes activism from the academy than in being part of a movement. So on the one hand were the changing interests of Stree Shakti members, a new kind of excitement derived from the success of the Telangana book, and on the other, that consuming exhaustion with activist work that demanded everything and returned disproportionately small dividends. Six women with careers of their own could not continue this running around, they said; Stree Shakti belongs to nobody, so other people should take over. But who would step in to take the reins? The looseness of the group had effectively blocked the emergence of an institution that could function even after its heads retired or withdrew. There were no pre-determined processes for decision-making, no formal allocation of responsibilities, only the informal consensus of six women on which all activity had to turn. And so it was that the group which was supposed to belong to nobody or to everybody, actually belonged *only* to these six women. Cases continued to come in, and since they could not in good conscience be turned away, work continued unabated. The sense of tiredness deepened.

Of all this, there is hardly a record in the dusty, yellowing Stree Shakti files stored now in a locked cupboard in Anveshi's reading room. Nor is there any mention of the hardships or pleasures, anxieties or gratifications that must have streaked the daily lives of individual women. Only occasionally, at the end of a letter to a colleague about a case or a writ or a campaign, there is also a line about the birth of a child, or a husband's job that

⁴³ Stree Shakti Sanghatana 1989:258, 19.

⁴⁴ The translated book is titled *Savaalaaksha Sandehaalu* or One Hundred Thousand Doubts: Women and Health Issues (Hyderabad: Stree Shakti Sanghatana n.d.).

takes him frequently away from home. On these documents, their edges bitten into lace-like designs by time-emboldened silverfish, the events of a life beyond activism make only incidental appearance, single-mindedly hiding from view everything but work itself. Few activists want now to remember and so re-live the stresses of the time in any detail – but it is difficult not to notice that when Stree Shakti finally dispersed, almost all members had young children at home; it is difficult not to wonder how much the new responsibilities of motherhood and the new pressures of family may have shaped the sense of exhaustion in activist work. Or for that matter how much other ‘incidental’ details like personality-traits, career-concerns and disagreements between friends might have helped chart the course of events to come. ‘The details are not important,’ Lalita said to me once, and I agreed, not wanting to become mired in the messiness of personal affairs. But then there they were, all those details, hardened bits of anger and resentment strewn about randomly or in small invisible piles, waiting still to be swept away, and in the meantime filtering imperceptibly into decisions about work and politics, creating alignments, encumbering intellectual engagements. The details *are* important, I wanted to say, in some fashion. The story of activism is, after all, as much about living, working, building careers, raising families, tending to friendships and growing older as it is about engineering social change. It is, after all, not merely intellectual history but part biography too. For my part, however, I hesitate to cross the line.

seven institutions

It is by now 1986. Punjab has long been the site of rebellion and terrorism, and in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination, anti-Sikh riots in New Delhi have awoken some among the intelligentsia to the stark realities of ethnicist tension. Hindu-Muslim

conflicts too have been escalating in several parts of the country since the start of the decade, but only sporadically, and it seems without the intensity of the Delhi riots. So it will be some months still before religion drops like a rock into the hands of the women's question, before the furious debates on minority rights, the UCC, and multiculturalism make it impossible to chart the "personal" as an area of oppression and radical feminist politics when it has so clearly become a protected area of identity and *not* a bastion that can be raided. So far there has only been gender, and class. But now feminists will have to face all the old questions in new light: how do you theorize the "personal" when it becomes the site of religious expression? How do you understand 'sullen silence' as the product of repression when some women appear to *choose* it deliberately, in defense of their religious identities? How do you speak in the language of liberalism for women's rights when not just the State but the 'Hindu nationalist' wings of government are talking the same talk?

With such questions emerging gradually in the background, the processes of institution-building begins in Hyderabad. Osmania University gives Anveshi a space from which to function: an old staff house, tucked on the western edge of the campus, surrounded by a large, lush garden.⁴⁵ Anveshi's Library is in the process of building up a collection, the Telangana book is published in 1989, and no longer are people finding copies of old Stree Shakti fliers with phone numbers printed on top and calling for help. By 1990, Susie Tharu and K.Lalita, working with a team of regional language editors and several ex-

⁴⁵ I am told now though, that Osmania's Chancellor has told Anveshi it can no longer use this space, and the group is currently in the process of moving into its new home, still not far from the University, in Barkatpura. The group never wanted the control of the University, but clearly proximity to the space demarcated by the University campus was (both practically and ideologically) a plus.

Stree Shakti members. finish editing a two-volume anthology of women's writing in ten different Indian languages, translated into English. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*⁴⁶ is intended, like the Telangana book, *not* merely to *add* the contributions of women to the corpus of Indian literature, but more to "begin a reconceptualization of what it has meant for women to be writing at the margins of the complex histories of patriarchy and empire."⁴⁷ And then Susie Tharu formally introduces Anveshi to a wider Indian academic audience:

Everyone in Anveshi is broadly speaking working in the field of education. Among us are writers, artists, journalists, people working in adult education, scientists, researchers and activists drawn from different institutions in Hyderabad ...Most of us have one foot in Anveshi and another in a mainstream educational organization. But when we came together to form this center, we came as people who had been involved in the everyday rough and tumble of the movement; as people who had experienced its tensions, its contradictions, its unexpected advances, and had many demands to make of scholarship, many questions to ask of knowledge, many problems to think through. We came as people who realized that the task of grounding feminist interventions in the soil of our particular history and our society required that we raid the academy."⁴⁸

Around the same time but some miles away in Secunderabad, Kalpana Kannabiran and her mother Vasanth, working in partnership with several others, begin "Asmita." They style this organization as a "Resource Center for Women" and so deliberately distance it from Anveshi's exclusive women's studies research focus. This is not to say that Asmita continues where Stree Shakti left off, functioning as an activist group in the traditional sense, and keeping up with case work, while Anveshi takes over women's studies. Quite the contrary, Asmita has sought to provide, among other things, the *resources* of an activist group (legal aid and legal counseling for example) without limiting its focus on

⁴⁶ Published in India by Oxford, and New York by the Feminist Press (1990).

⁴⁷ Susie Tharu, "Introducing Anveshi" in *Lokayan Bulletin* 8/3 (1990) 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

gender to the issues raised by individual cases. Both Anveshi and Asmita today claim to draw together women – several hundred women – from diverse backgrounds, with different interests and different needs, and all with individual reasons to form associations with women's groups. Both are funded largely by foreign sources⁴⁹; both fund research projects; both organize seminars, although Anveshi much more frequently than Asmita; and both conceive of themselves quite literally as “spaces” to which women may turn, whatever their reasons. The difference lies perhaps in the qualitative nature of these spaces. On a day-to-day basis, Anveshi is part library, part academic department, functioning much like any other except without the control of any academic institution. Quite literally, Anveshi is a retreat from the turmoil of the city, from the burdens of university policy, and from the irrepressible pushes and pulls of the



research centre for women's studies

Anveshi

Figure 3: *Anveshi's current brochure (1998). The photograph is by Sanjeev Saith, and appeared prior to this on a reissued Subaltern Studies 2 volume, indicating some connections between these two intellectual ventures (The figure in the photograph within is recognizably that of Nehru). Susie Tharu remarked once at a Law Committee meeting that she liked to think of the woman looking directly at the camera (in the back, her face slightly hidden) as 'Anveshi.'*

⁴⁹ In addition to several local sources, Asmita is funded largely by the Humanist Institute for Co-Operation with Developing Countries (HIVOS) in The Netherlands, and Anveshi for the past two years at least by the Ford Foundation.

movement: a place to read, reflect, discuss, write. Asmita in clear contrast is a place of business, an institutional node linking people and groups to each other and to sources of information: lawyers to women in need of legal counsel; students to mentors and reference material; women writers and artists to other women with similar interests, and in a common facility available for their use. Asmita also functions as an information-base, most significantly for other NGOs or community groups working in the area, providing everything from booklets about the nuclear tests, liquor consumption, and the women's reservation Bill, to recorded cassettes of songs about the movement, and posters with catchy slogans on a variety of themes. Both Asmita and Anveshi are women's "spaces," then, though one retains the flavor of the movement while the other has acquired that of an academic department.

Predictably, if somewhat ironically given Stree Shakti's organizational 'looseness,' it is



not Anveshi but Asmita that has become more fully corporatized. In July of last year, Asmita moved into its

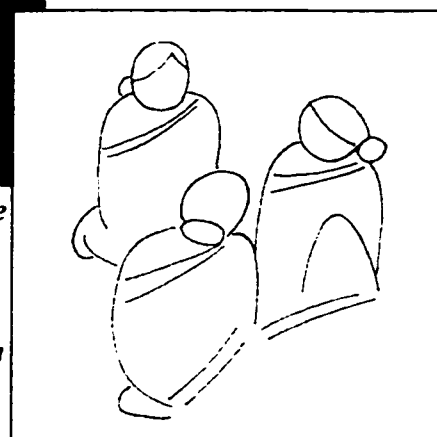


Figure 4-5: Lunch at Asmita's old office. Senior activists are usually not present, except on special occasions. The sketch to the right is from the Asmita bulletin board, and is just visible in the background of the above image. The images mirror each other, though the sketch speaks to an egalitarian ideal that the realities of institutional functioning largely belie.

impressive new offices on the top floors of a residential building in Secunderabad, complete with reception area, multi-line phone system, the best in office furniture, separate conference room and separate work areas for members of the Asmita Board. With corporate hierarchy built into its office floor plan, diversity built into its institutional ideology, 'networking,' 'professionalism,' 'accountability' and 'conflict management/resolution' are terms that help describe Asmita's refashioned feminist praxis in the jet-set world of the modern institutional NGO. The ideals of 'looseness' and informal functioning, however, have not disappeared: sketches of small groups of women sitting on the floor in tight circles intently engaged in discussion, or of traditionally attired women holding hands or dancing in celebration of 'sisterhood' appear often enough on office bulletin boards to indicate these ideals are still very much in place for local groups and the women's movement as a whole.



Figure 6: More images of other ideals: a section from Asmita's brochure.

So Asmita's open embracing of the structures of the modern corporate world naturally provoked critical comments. Asmita might have responded by saying that an open hierarchy, with clear channels for the expression of difference and pre-determined processes of conflict-management, is preferable to a set-up in which also power operates,

but does so invisibly and therefore far more harmfully.⁵⁰ The debate is not mine to settle, however, and I bring it up here only to note that the legacies of Stree Shakti's decisions live on in on-going debates about what kind of institutional structure is best suited to activist work of the kind that is now necessary.

eight new questions

What kind of activism *is* now necessary? It would be no exaggeration to say that events of the late 80s and early 90s – the Mandal-Masjid years, so-called after the anti-Mandal agitations and the BJP's Babri Masjid campaign⁵¹ – not only change the political landscape in New Delhi, but profoundly alter intellectual perspectives on such issues as multiculturalism, diversity, 'secularism' and 'communalism.' In the process, each of these issues becomes a lens through which gender is refracted time and again in very

⁵⁰ I should point out that this is not my conjecture, but a response drawn from a conversation with Kalpana Kannabiran, President of Asmita, several weeks after the inaugural function at Asmita's new office. Criticisms of Asmita's institutional glamour aside, the inaugural party clearly presented an opportunity to meet and discuss funding with the Indian representative of HIVOS, who was present at the function.

⁵¹ The late 80s and early 90s are commonly referred to in India as the Mandal-Masjid years, after two 'events' that gripped the country, set several new movements in motion, and altered forever the way women's groups would look at the twin issues of religion and caste. In 1990, then Prime Minister V.P. Singh's government decided to implement the recommendations of the (ten year-old) Mandal Commission Report, which called for further reservations of government jobs and educational seats for the BCs (Backward Castes) and OBCs (Other Backward Castes), in some states exceeding the Supreme Court-set limit of 50%. The decision provoked a most unexpected reaction. There were the usual protests of course, by upper-caste men and women who sometimes cleaned roads and set up shoe-shining stalls to indicate that those would be the only jobs open to them if the Commission's guidelines were adopted. But more shocking than these were the actions of several upper-caste youth, mostly in New Delhi, who would douse themselves with kerosene and set fire to themselves. The media was transfixed by these never-before-seen spectacles of upper-caste anger and desperation, and with it, many sections of the country. Also around this time, riding a wave of Hindu (upper-caste?) anger after the fallout of the Shah Bano affair, BJP President L.K.Advani began his famous 'Rath Yatra' (journey on a chariot) demanding the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Riots followed in the path of the Rath, but the worst rioting happened after the mosque was demolished by kar sevaks (volunteers) of the

specific ways. For activist groups, this means that all the old perspectives will have to be further broadened to include religion and caste. If the Indian women's movement developed over the years a partial critique of Marxism – "Marxism does not have an analysis of women's oppression that anywhere near matches the sophistication or the scope of its analysis of economic exploitation," wrote Tharu in 1986⁵² – this critique did not at any time extend to the Marxist paradigm itself, or to assumptions about rationality and the primacy of class in conceptualizing social oppression. Groups like Stree Shakti clearly had the tools to connect the worlds of international finance to the daily lives of women, but even their delineations of the "personal" did not significantly include considerations of caste or religion. Class, and within it gender were the social unifiers within this scheme; after all, religion and caste represented only such primeval affiliations as were bound to fade in the modern world. The Mandal-Masjid years challenged just these assumptions with bewildering force, shaping modern Hindu ethnicity to a large degree and galvanizing what is known in India today as the Dalit movement. It became impossible after these 'events' to deal with categories like gender *except* in relation to other markers of social difference. Writes Susie Tharu, "It has become increasingly clear to us...that women's studies or feminist research is not necessarily only about women. Its starting point is certainly women ... [but] the question of women is not a separate issue. *Gender is central to our social architecture.*"⁵³ So the focus shifts in the mid-90s, not away from gender of course, but to the 'social architecture' in which gender is inscribed. "As a result of the work we have done," says

BJP-RSS-VHP combine, shattering the cosmopolitan veneers of even cities like Bombay. More on the anti-Mandal agitations and the Babri Masjid campaign later.

⁵² Tharu 1986:4.

⁵³ Tharu 1990:63 (emphasis added).

Anveshi's most recent brochure, expressing a sentiment I believe Asmita would equally endorse, "it has become clear to us that women's studies is about changing the situation of women by also challenging received notions of caste, class and community. This awareness, in particular, has had an important bearing on many of our ongoing projects."

We might note at this juncture that the focus of feminist activism does not shift to a 'social architecture' built from caste and religion easily or without many sharp jolts along the way. The Mandal-Masjid years brought Indian feminism to a virtual impasse, a tight knot of emotions and contradictory political positionings, from which the movement is still in the process of disentangling itself. I have often heard activists remark, 'We cannot talk about obscenity or the UCC so easily any more. These are complex issues, not so simple as we once thought.' And I, listening, would take it for granted that I knew what these 'complexities' were that have made it difficult for Indian feminism to function as it once did. But 'complexity,' I came to realize, was a kind of shorthand reference to the current dilemmas of the women's movement, to the moment of impasse, and by extension to the limits of liberal theory, as the 'women's question' increasingly confronts the peculiar figure of the liberated-liberal intolerant/chauvinist woman. As such, this shorthand reference of ordinary conversation needs I believe to be taken apart, especially at this juncture, when debates on women's issues are being funneled deliberately into larger debates on difference, diversity, multiculturalism and liberal theory – when the women's question has become, for all practical purposes, almost entirely synonymous with the question of ethnicity. What is this complexity, and how does it reflect feminist understandings of 'social architecture'? What kinds of feminist interventions are now deemed necessary, and to what extent can these realistically be implemented? And

finally how does the structure of a corporatized institution aid in the process of defining an *effective* feminist praxis in a 'complex' world?

part two **the emerging culture of ethnicism**

one **introduction**

I shift in this second section from descriptions of work and campaigns to those of intellectual engagements and critiques. There is a staggering amount of published material on issues relating to ethnicism in India, not all of it directly relevant to my present purpose, but not all irrelevant either. In order to focus my discussion and to keep it tethered to the Hyderabad/Andhra Pradesh cultural context, then, I will use two 'events' from recent Andhra history as tools with which to draw out activist assumptions about the nature of 'complexity.' The first of these is the rape of Rameeza Bee and the murder of her husband at the Nallakunta Police Station in 1978, and the second is the killing of Dalits by Reddys at Chunduru in 1991. Ostensibly, the first involves the issue of religion, and the second that of caste. I will argue, however, that interpretations of these events have two phases: one in which they are regarded largely, if not wholly, as human rights concerns (with gender being one major sub-section within this paradigm), and one which follows sometime after when the discourse of 'human rights' is replaced with that of ethnicism. In other words, there is a process of retrospective re-evaluation of past positions and past understandings that takes place, not coincidentally I think, in the wake of the Mandal-Masjid affairs. And in this new politically charged interpretive context, the discourses that once surrounded the Rameeza Bee case are re-read and pronounced now to be 'communal', and all prior incidents of upper-caste violence are re-

cast now, with the emergence of the Dalit movement, as “other Chundurur.”⁵⁴ Ethnicity becomes the dominant descriptor of social reality.

It should be said that this process of retrospective re-evaluation is not by any means a new trend: fresh analyses of past events are routinely undertaken in feminist studies to demonstrate the role of women in social movements, for example, or to reveal implicit assumptions about gender not thus far noticed. The POW and later Stree Shakti's own critique of the M/L Party as oblivious to ‘the woman's question,’ which led to the formation of some of the first autonomous women's groups in the country, is itself a case in point. It is understood, of course, that ‘the women's question’ has not remained a static set of concerns, nor has gender remained a historically fixed entity. Although feminists have been largely sensitive to the mutability of gender dynamics – acknowledging, for instance, the differences between modern feminism and the ‘feminism’ of those women taking part in the Telangana Armed Struggle, even while tracing connections between the two – the same logic has not applied when dealing with *certain* modern assertions of ethnic selfhood. So while one major vein of the response to Hindu ethnicity has involved deconstruction – exposing the constructedness of ethnicity as it were, even while fixing opposition to it – the response to caste-based ethnicity in the Dalit movement has been quite the opposite: to fix modern Dalit conceptions of selfhood as historically unchanging evidence of a timeless oppression perpetrated on vast sections of the Indian populace. Why the differential treatment? My (perhaps naïve) question might be answered by arguing that the underlying critique is directed against Hindu hegemony, and hence it is necessary, even laudable, to ally with the Dalit

⁵⁴ K. Balagopal, “Post Chundurur and other Chundurur” in *Economic and Political*

movement in opposition to Hindu nationalism in the interests of representative democracy. Leaving aside for the moment obvious problems with any unified notion of 'hegemony' (and the implicit assumption that it is the exclusive preserve of upper caste Hindus), we might note the emergence of a peculiar contradiction: while ethnicism in Hindu nationalist form is regarded as an instrument of hegemony and a most fundamental threat to democracy, ethnicism in Dalit form becomes *the* means to combat hegemony and achieve true democracy. No connections are made between the two forms of communal expression.

How do activists and other intellectuals resolve or explain this contradiction? Do they even take note of their own contradictory positionings vis-à-vis these two major forms of ethnic self-assertion? My argument would be that they do not, for one simple reason: generally speaking, activists do not see the Dalit movement as an ethnic movement at all, and certainly not as one which is analogous in its basic construction to Hindu nationalism. Part of the reason for this derives perhaps from the particular use of the word "communal" in the Indian context to apply only to religious communities, and there with such objectionable overtones as intolerance and chauvanism. Not only is the category "communal" overdetermined, then, but there is also no other available vocabulary to link different forms of ethnicism, whether these are religious, linguistic or caste-based. But deficiencies in phraseology can only partially explain this lacuna in theory, and for a more thorough understanding we must turn to the social context in which Indian activism has formed and developed: its closeness to people's movements and other (often radical) movements of the Left; its long-standing antagonism to State

structures; the continuing attraction of the Civil Liberties paradigm; the influence of what we might consider a liberal reformulation of Marxist thought.

The following essay has four parts (but more than four sections). In the first, I make a case for understanding the Dalit movement as one based fundamentally on ethnicity; for regarding caste in the modern Indian context as a form of ethnic collectivity. Since the traditional definitions of caste distinguish it from ethnic groupings, and since Dalit identity is not often described as 'ethnic' in the available literature, a discussion of my rationale for reading caste as ethnicity is appropriate at this juncture. In the second and third parts, I deal with the Rameeza Bee case and the incidents at Chundurur respectively, with an eye to demonstrating first how 'ethnicity' becomes the dominant mode of interpreting and describing social dynamics, past or present, and second how, and with what consequences, different forms of ethnic self-expression are differentially valued by activists. The fourth part is largely a summation of the uneven, and indeed opportunistic/political, constitution of 'complexity' in activist discourse. The summation is followed by a brief analysis of how this category continues to define the impasses of modern feminism, even – or perhaps I should say *especially* – from within the carefully raised ramparts of the modern activist institution.

two

the ethnicity of caste

Having said thus far that the definitions of caste are generally distinct from those of ethnic groups, I might begin this section with Barth's observation about the Indian caste system being a "special case of a stratified poly-ethnic system."⁵⁵ "The boundaries of castes are defined by ethnic criteria," writes Barth, and the main difference between this

and other poly-ethnic stratified systems lies in the logic of boundary-maintenance: "individual failures in performance lead to out-casting and not down-casting" and new groups are incorporated through *sanskritization*.⁵⁶ I begin with Barth's observation in part to indicate that when definitions of ethnicity stress the processes by which boundaries between groups are drawn and maintained, caste can quite easily be taken as a form of ethnic grouping. Dumont's elaboration on "pure hierarchy" and M.N.Srinivas' emphasis on the dominance of Brahminical culture (though the concept of 'sanskritization') have, however, canonically defined caste as a rigid system of stratification that is justified, directly or otherwise, by religion. Caste is understood here as a culturally coherent *system* within Hinduism that is based on the immutable opposition of purity to impurity: it is seen as an 'overt institutional form' (to borrow a phrase from Barth) and *not* as a diverse series of negotiable relationships between local communities (*jatis*) which are not always or exclusively guided by considerations of purity.⁵⁷ Certainly, 'sanskritization' tries to explain some of the occupational fluidity that exists among castes. "the incongruence between deemed occupation and actual occupation,"⁵⁸ but it does so by rigidly instituting Sanskritic-Brahminical culture as *the*

⁵⁵ Barth 1969:27.

⁵⁶ Barth 1969:27-8. "Sanskritization," was the term famously coined by the Indian anthropologist M.N. Srinivas. It should be noted, however, that Srinivas explicitly distinguished this idea of linguistic transformation from 'Brahminization,' or the processes by which lower castes seek to emulate the high-caste ritual behaviors, thereby *both* rejecting their particular caste-positions, *and* implicitly accepting the logic by which caste hierarchies are devised and maintained (See M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon 1952)). Contemporary theorists have tended to collapse the two. But while Srinivas explicitly distinguished Sanskritization from 'Brahminization,' contemporary theorists have tended to collapse the two, and my use of the term here necessarily references this altered meaning.

⁵⁷ See Barth 1969:12-3.

⁵⁸ Dipankar Gupta, "Continuous hierarchies and discrete castes" in *Economic and Political Weekly* December 1 1984, 2049. Gupta's article was published in three parts, the

unquestioned universal ideal of Hindu society, with no room for alternatives or for critique. These prominent theories, and others that follow in the same vein, effectively pre-empt any understanding of caste as a set of (even hierarchically) negotiable relationships, specifically by excluding or undermining the influence of (local) economics and politics, or what Barth may have termed 'ecological factors.'⁵⁹

And yet – ironically – these very theories which forestall perceptions of individual castes as ethnic groupings within Hindu society are also those which give Dalit identity in contemporary India much of its justification and its force. To explain this further, I must shift from academic theories to a brief description of caste as a political category used on the one hand by the State to institute social reform programs, and on the other by politicians as a tool of mobilization and indeed a vote-bank.

The first thing that needs to be said in this context is that political vocabulary does not classify society according to varnas or jatis (that is, according to occupation), but draws upon those distinctions to classify communities according to their relative positions within Indian society. Society is divided first into Forward and Backward castes (BCs), but beyond these are the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs).⁶⁰ The purpose of this classification is of course to

first two on November 17 1984 (pp. 1955-8) and November 24 1984 (pp. 2003-5) respectively.

⁵⁹ Cf. Gupta 1984; and Nicholas Dirks, "Castes of mind" in *Representations* 37 (1992) 56-78, for critiques of Dumont (and in Gupta's article Srinivas also) along these lines.

⁶⁰ This terminology has its origins in colonial classifications of Indian society: under the British, laboring castes were referred to as 'Depressed Castes,' and Ambedkar – lawyer and leader of anti-caste movements in Maharashtra – used the term to denote the 'productive' castes. Gandhi's term for lower castes and those excluded from the system – 'Harijans,' or 'children of God' – has long since gone out of vogue, mostly because it is now regarded as condescending, but also because newer classifications have further subdivided the category.

differentiate between communities in terms of their access to resources, education and capacity for progress, and then to institute programs for social reform. In the Indian case, this has almost exclusively come to mean implementing policies for 'reservation' (the equivalent of Affirmative Action Programs). Reservations in educational institutions and in Central and State government undertakings have existed in some states since pre-independence days, but the Indian government's attempts to formally evolve national policies have been mired in debate and controversy.⁶¹ The first Backward Classes Commission⁶² was formed in 1953, but failed to evolve national criteria to determine 'backwardness.' Its report, and several others after, was tabled in the Lok Sabha, but never discussed. On August 14 1961, the Home Ministry finally issued orders for individual states to draw up lists of backward communities, and fix their own quotas of reservation.⁶³ By 1978, no less than ten states had followed the Ministry's order. The Union government's second attempt at creating a definite national policy for reservation produced in 1980 the now-famous Mandal Commission Report, which also was tabled in

Sociologists often continue to make a distinction between 'caste Hindus' and (by implication) 'untouchables' or 'Harijans,' but here again government classifications have gone further. Then there are regional variations: in Tamil Nadu, for instance, the major cleavage is between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, very broadly speaking without reference to further categorization. The debate over the government's criteria for 'backwardness' has also served to problematize the logic of these classifications further.

⁶¹ I should note that at the time there was still some debate as to whether Reservations were the best available method to allow the 'depressed classes' to progress, economically and socially. The debate today is not so much about the need for reservations *per se*, but about percentages and time-limits.

⁶² Note that this was called the Backward *Classes* Commission, even though the "Backward Classes" were caste groups (at the time including all lower castes and non-caste groups). If it was simple to equate caste with class at that point, this is not so much the case now, though many argue that even the poorest Brahmins are far better off than poor SCs, for example.

⁶³ see P.C. Chatterji, "Reservations: Theory and Practice" in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T.V. Satyamurthy (New Delhi: Oxford 1996) 296-7.

the Lok Sabha but again not discussed. This time, the Commission listed as many as 3,743 communities as 'backward' (as opposed to 2399 listed in the first report) and recommended 27% reservation for the backward castes (including in this case OBCs), apart from the standing SC/ST quota of 22.5% in government and public sector jobs, and government-supported educational institutions. These recommendations, if implemented, would bring the total percentage of reservations to 49.5%, just under the Supreme Court cap (given in a 1963 ruling) of 50%.⁶⁴

It was not the Report, however, but reservation policies adopted independently by State governments in Bihar and Gujarat that sparked the first anti-reservation riots in those states. Perhaps it was this threat of further social unrest, which would in turn have jeopardized Congress prospects in the next elections, that prevented further discussion of the Report at the time. Clearly by that point, the issue of reservations was featuring prominently in electoral politics. But the Mandal Report's second introduction into the national spotlight in 1990 – the Commission's recommendations were to be implemented then in fulfillment of an election promise *and* to coincide with Ambedkar's birth centenary – would turn out to be a serious miscalculation, and would cost then Prime Minister V.P. Singh his government.⁶⁵ The anti-Mandal agitations, as the demonstrations of the time came to be known, were not in some senses very different from previous anti-

⁶⁴ The 3,743 figure amounts to 52% of India's total population. A 27% reservation is, then, just about half of what the backward castes' numbers warrant, but keeps the program in conformity with Supreme Court guidelines. In combination with State-adopted policies, however, the numbers in individual States could have been greater than 50%.

⁶⁵ There is of course a much longer political story behind V.P. Singh's decision to announce the implementation of the Mandal recommendations, which I will not get into here. Suffice it to say that the BJP, which was supporting V.P. Singh in a coalition government (in opposition to Rajiv Gandhi's Congress) withdrew their support over the Mandal issue, and the National Front government fell in November 1990.

reservation protests. In fact, the 1980 Ahmedabad agitations had been far more violent and had continued for much longer (nearly three months), bringing professionals and students alike onto the streets. Nor were the anti-Mandal agitations as widespread: they were confined mostly to Delhi, with only a few spin-offs elsewhere. What was perhaps unique about these agitations, what stuck in the mental images of the time, was one aspect of its method: self-immolation, images of which were carried far and wide by the print media, requiring almost no language to convey meaning. Photographs of upper-caste youth dousing themselves with kerosene and then setting themselves alight in public protest of Mandal reservation quotas, and then pictures of burned and charred bodies on hospital stretchers were a daily front-page feature in all the Indian papers, and on several foreign ones as well. Accompanying these images was a storm of rhetoric on the ‘Mandalization’ of India, the brain-drain the country would suffer, and on the absolute devaluation of any idea of ‘merit.’ For anti-Mandal protestors, it was not just their own futures that seemed to be at stake, but that of the country itself.

So fierce was the rhetoric, and so powerful the images, it is no wonder that the word ‘Dalit,’ and with it an entirely new *political* understanding of caste, came into vogue following the Mandal period. Mandal did not, however, by itself precipitate such an understanding, though it did give incipient Dalit groups a new sense of urgency. The political consciousness that finally crystallized after Mandal had in fact been building in parts of Northern India for just under a decade, with Kanshi Ram’s founding of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP; literally, the ‘Party of the Majority’) in 1984 with the sole stated aim of uniting fractured SC, ST and OBC communities – the ‘bahujans’ or the majority of the Indian population – to ultimately take power. “We have a one-point

program.” Kanshi Ram is famous for stating, “take power.”⁶⁶ But the BSP’s initial success was limited: indicating in part that the idea of an exclusively caste-based politics had not yet fully taken root. Despite the clear role caste played by then in electoral politics, it appeared that even the most educated among the OBCs did not recognize the possibility or potential of a bahujan electoral constituency.⁶⁷ Mandal and the upper-caste response to Mandal changed all this, conscientizing the OBC community, and ‘bahujanising’ or welding together, as Kanshi Ram never could, SCs, STs, and OBCs into a broad social base. The door was opened, from that point on, to an openly bahujan-based, bahujan-controlled electoral politics.

Finally, the impact of the BJP’s Ramjanmabhoomi/Babri Masjid campaign, and specifically Advani’s Rath Yatra, cannot be discounted either. Continuing in the background of the Mandal upheaval, this campaign had the apparent aim of unifying the Hindu community around such themes as historical hurt and political wrongdoing. I will discuss the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign further in a later chapter; for the moment I want only to draw attention to the underlying idea of a politically united Hindu community that emerges forcefully through this campaign, *even as* fissures between caste-groups are dramatically playing themselves out on the streets of New Delhi. Ethnic identity, writes Donald Horowitz, expands and contracts “to fill the political space available for its

⁶⁶ Quoted in Gail Omvedt, “The Anti-Caste Movement” in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T.V. Satyamurthy (New Delhi: Oxford 1996) 344. I should clarify that, in spite of aiming to unite SC, ST, and OBC communities, the BSP remained until very recently an SC-dominated organization. To keep itself politically viable, the party has now been forced to expand its base and seek the support of Backward Castes and minorities.

⁶⁷ Kancha Ilaiah, “BSP and Caste as Ideology” in *Economic and Political Weekly* March 19 1994, 668-9.

expression.”⁶⁸ Barth points to the permeable and malleable character of group-boundaries. So on one level, the mobilization of one kind of Hindu community over Mandal and another over Masjid might be viewed as ‘typical’ of ethnic group behavior. But on another, the very *simultaneity* of this expansion and contraction in the Mandal-Masjid years carries its own particularly bitter meaning: as Dalitbahujan theorist Kancha Ilaiah would later write, in the “Mandal Yuga (era of Mandal) ... [upper caste Hindus] abuse us as meritless creatures, but in their Ramrajya [ideal state] we are defined again as Hindus.”⁶⁹ This contradiction, then, which is an intrinsic part of the character of the ethnic group, is the flashpoint that spurs the still incipient Dalit movement towards consolidation, and introduces the category/concept of the ‘Dalit’ into all considerations of caste from that point on.

The word ‘Dalit’ means ‘downtrodden,’ and is not an entirely new usage in the Indian context. It seems to have evolved from local Marathi expression (referring specifically to SC communities), and was first used in a political context by a Maharashtrian group calling itself the ‘Dalit Panthers’ in the early 1970s. At the time, however, the concerns of caste were not dissimilar from those of class: caste *was* class in several important ways. Gail Omvedt tells us that the emphasis in Maharashtra – as elsewhere in the country – was on *kulaks*, or rich peasants who may themselves have belonged to backward communities; that it seemed to most Left intellectuals that non-Brahmin movements had “exhausted [their] historically progressive role.”⁷⁰ So even though the Dalit Panthers clearly drew a measure of their identity from Black Panther activists in the

⁶⁸ Horowitz 1975:137.

⁶⁹ Kancha Ilaiah, “Productive labour, consciousness and history” in *Subaltern Studies IX* ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1996a) 166.

United States, apparently molding themselves as a distinct racial group, the focus on what we would today call ethnicity was minimal, if it was there at all. Very much in step with other social movements of the period, the Dalit Panthers too were more anti-bourgeois than anti-Brahmin. Strictly speaking, 'Dalit' remains today a category that refers only to Scheduled Caste communities, but the efforts of such groups as the Dalit Maha Sabha of Andhra Pradesh to include STs and OBCs under the same rubric, and the parallel efforts of the BSP to further move away from its original SC focus, have broadened the term greatly, even if only by irrevocably blurring its boundaries.

This, then, is the first clue to understanding constructions of caste as ethnicities. 'Dalit,' or 'Dalitbahujan' (Dalit majority) can be as large or as small a category as specific contexts demand. At the same time, the category's outermost boundaries are clearly defined, for it can never expand to include upper-caste Hindus or the 'Brahminical' castes. This is the juncture at which academic theories about caste become relevant. Directly or otherwise, accurately or not, what Dalitbahujan theorists pick up from a Srinivas or a Dumont is an top-down understanding of social oppression, with the upper-castes at the summit and Dalitbahujans at the nadir of a ruthlessly maintained Brahminical hierarchy. The social and economic progress of members of any non-Brahminical caste is understood here according to Srinivas' theory of 'sanskritisation,' or what Ilaiah might have called 'neo-Kshatriyaisation.' Dipankar Gupta points out that certainly not all moves on the part of the lower castes to appropriate life-styles not traditionally their own can be legitimately read as 'sanskritization,' but Dalitbahujan theory firmly refuses even such partial attempts to de-link caste from class. Of course

⁷⁰ Omvedt 1996:343.

this mutually constitutive link between caste and class has been a feature of lower caste movements, as we have seen, since the 1970s. But if caste considerations were at that time being subsumed by class, readers might note that now the *reverse* is true: the idea of ‘sanskritization’ ensures that all movements of class are read in the light of caste-oppression, and not the other way around. ‘Kulak’ is not a *caste*-neutral category, a Dalit theorist might argue, and it should never be regarded as such, for that would imply its co-optation into Brahminism, which is not itself a *class*-neutral category.

But what is this Brahminism? What is said to constitute this oppressive Brahminical culture? A proper answer to these questions would require delving into academic, popular and even Orientalist constructions of the figure of the Brahmin within Hindu society, for it seems to me that Dalitbahujan theory draws heavily on each of these. Being short on space, however, I will note only a few points to indicate how a Dalitbahujan cultural cohesion – a second important aspect of ethnic identity – is built from (and in opposition to) particular constructions of Brahminism. Barth tells us that “much of the activity of political innovators is concerned with the codification of idioms: the selection of signals for identity and the assertion of value for these cultural diacritica, and the suppression or denial of relevance for other differentiae.”⁷¹ Kancha Ilaiah’s work *Why I am not a Hindu*, is key in this regard.⁷² First published in 1996, this slim semi-

⁷¹ Barth 1969:35.

⁷² Kancha Ilaiah *Why I am not a Hindu: a Sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture, and political economy* (Calcutta: Samya 1996b). A much abridged (and slightly modified) version of this work was published in *Subaltern Studies IX* (1996a), cited above. I should note that I have chosen to focus on Ilaiah’s work to describe the contemporary constructions of Brahminism first because (as noted above) Ilaiah’s work is really the only one that levels a sustained critique at Hindu/Brahminical culture, and second – for my purposes – this work is rooted, both socially and politically, in the Andhra (and specifically Telangana) context. Kancha Ilaiah was born and brought up in a Telangana village, and has

autobiographical volume is one of very few polemical works to be produced by a Dalitbahujan theorist on the subject of caste (specifically in the Telangana/Andhra context), and as such has had considerable impact on both activism and social science study in India. As the title indicates, much of the book (and of Ilaiah's work besides) is directed towards situating lower caste identity *outside* the folds of Hinduism, and radically refashioning Dalit identity in the process.⁷³ Writes Ilaiah in the opening pages.

... not only I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word 'Hindu' – not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days. We heard about *Turukoollu* (Muslims), we heard about *Kirastanapoollu* (Christians), we heard about *Baapanoollu* (Brahmins) and *Koomatoollu* (Baniyas [a merchant caste]) spoken of as people different from us ... There are at least some aspects of life common to us and the *Turukoollu* and *Kirastanapoollu* ... But today we are being told we have a common religious and cultural relationship with the *Baapanoollu* and the *Koomatoollu*. This is not merely surprising; it is shocking (xi).

Ilaiah's argument is structured, then, around this idea that not religion, but caste is the dominant reality of Dalit social life. Since Dalits have no familiarity with Hinduism, never having been included in Hindu society, it follows that Hinduism and Brahminism are synonymous, that in fact *all* Hinduism is inherently brahminical, and that all non-Brahmins are by definition non-Hindu. To demonstrate the impermeability of these caste boundaries, Ilaiah turns his attention to lived cultural realities. The essential difference

personally been involved with first the Civil Liberties movement and then Dalit Civil Liberties groups; his writing is based very substantially on his own life (growing up Dalit in the Telangana region) and work (being part of the Civil Liberties movement) experiences. Living and working now in Hyderabad, Ilaiah has become a virtual spokesperson for the Dalit community in the area, as well as a representative of Dalit interests in more national contexts (recently, for example, he was a key speaker at the NAWO (National Alliance of Women's Organizations) meeting held to debate the question of reservations for women in politics).

⁷³ Barth 1969:35. The impetus for this non-Hindu focus, it should be said, comes from none other than Dr. Ambedkar himself, who converted to Buddhism in 1956. The problem for Ambedkar, writes Ram Swarup, "was how to oppose an iniquitous caste system without ceasing to be a part of the larger culture of the land. This, he found, he could easily

between Hindu/Brahmin culture and Dalit culture is given in a commonly used Dalitbahujan (Telugu) saying: “*maadi panipaata samscruti* (Ours is a culture of work and songs), *valladi chaduvu sandhya samscruti* (theirs is a culture of learning and worship).”⁷⁴ And the need of the hour is to establish, understand and celebrate this *distinctive* culture of work and song, and so to turn the tables on Hindu/Brahmin society, making that the radical ‘other’ after 3000 years of unilateral abuse: “... we are skilled producers, productive instrument makers, creative builders of the material basis of society ... we are determined to prove that Hinduism and Brahminism represent the worldviews of the atrocious ‘others’ who have been parasites and whose role has never been positive or constructive.”⁷⁵ In Barth’s words then, the need of the hour is to revive “select traditional culture traits and to [establish] historical traditions to justify and glorify the [chosen cultural] idioms and the [ethnic] identity.”⁷⁶

The rest of the book is devoted to comparing and contrasting Dalitbahujan and Hindu/Brahmin birth, youth, training, marriage, gender, food, education, language, civil society, work, daily routines and death, finding at each step measure upon measure of radical difference, based on distinguishing the culture of work from the culture of worship. For instance on language, Ilaiah writes that “the basic difference in [the] two languages is that Dalitbahujan language refers to productive work, whereas Brahminical language refers to prayer and to God”; and on cooking: “For a Dalitbahujan woman cooking is a mundane activity, meant to feed the human body and keep it going, whereas

do by embracing Buddhism” (Ram Swarup “Complementary religions” in *Indian Express* January 9 1999).

⁷⁴ Quoted in Ilaiah 1996a:168. There is an irony even in this reference, however, for the word “samscruti” is itself one borrowed from Sanskrit(ic tradition).

⁷⁵ Ilaiah 1996a:167.

for a Hindu, God is central even to the kitchen.”⁷⁷ Hindu gods too are violent and patriarchal, while Dalitbahujan gods are much more “humane and egalitarian.” “culturally rooted in production, protection, and procreation,” and accessible to every person in every village, with no class or caste barriers.⁷⁸ And finally that the “difference between Hindu brahminical death and Dalitbahujan death lies in the very concept of death itself ... A brahmin believes that life must be lived for the sake of death which will make him eternal” whereas Dalitbahujans believe “death is a one-time affair,” “a loss in terms of productive work.”⁷⁹

Ilaiah’s work has received some criticism, especially from feminists, for his suggestion that Dalit society is inherently more egalitarian than Hindu society, and that whatever patriarchal structures exist in Dalit communities are somehow less oppressive to women.⁸⁰ Indeed, I believe Ilaiah’s work could be subjected to even further criticism for its virtual caricaturing of Hindu culture – even the above examples provide some evidence of exaggeration – and its almost unquestioning celebration of all things Dalit. To critique this work on the basis of ‘factual’ evidence, however, would be to miss its point entirely. As Ilaiah himself says (significantly, in a passage that appears only in the *Subaltern Studies* essay): “this discussion might appear ‘unbelievable,’ ‘unacceptable,’ or ‘untruthful’ to those ‘scholars and thinkers’ who are born and brought up in Hindu families ... I deliberately do not want to take precautions, qualify my statements, footnote my material, nuance my claims, for the simple reason that my claims are not meant to be

⁷⁶ Barth 1969:35. This position establishes of course the primordality of caste

⁷⁷ Ilaiah 1996a: 173, 181.

⁷⁸ Ilaiah 1996a:193, 192.

⁷⁹ Ilaiah 1996b:102; 107.

nuanced in the first place. They are meant to raise Dalitbahujan consciousness and to show the 'other' in ...such a way that their hegemony is jeopardized and our hegemony begins to be established."⁸¹ This position notwithstanding, it is necessary to risk counter criticism and point out that Ilaiah's argument does rest on an often caricatured, often exaggerated, stereotypical understanding of Brahminical culture; that it draws most obviously on the academic (and now also popular) assumption that caste is a strict hierarchy ordained exclusively by religion, with no room for the various negotiations that may be necessitated by local economics or politics.⁸² It is important to recognize, in

⁸⁰ See Ilaiah's chapters on marriage and Hindu gods (1996b: 20-35, 71-102), as well as his summations in the final chapter (124-8).

⁸¹ Ilaiah 1996a:168.

⁸² Interestingly, such caricatures of brahminical culture are not themselves absent from 'mainstream' Hinduism: folkloric traditions are replete with stories about greedy and arrogant brahmins whose claims to piety are a sham. For example, one popular story tells of a peasant girl whose character and devotion were such that she crossed a river everyday simply by skimming its surface. The local brahmin pundit saw this, and in his arrogance assumed that if the girl could do this, then he certainly could too since he was, after all, a brahmin. So he tried, and drowned. In addition to this folklore, Ilaiah also ignores another historical tradition of incisive critique: the bhakti movement. His preoccupation with disassociating Dalit culture from Hindu culture (and associating it with Buddhist culture instead) leads him to deny rather than to reclaim this other heritage. But then again, his objective is to make a radical break with religious tradition, and the now-canonized insights and modalities of bhakti, or the familiar folkloric critiques, would hardly serve such a purpose. Eleanor Zelliot makes a similar point in the Maharashtrian context, which is significantly also home to a strong Dalit movement, from pre-Independence Ambedkarite reform initiatives through to the Dalit Panther movement of the 70s and the virtual burgeoning of Dalit Sahitya (Dalit Literature) in the present. Writing of the Maharashtrian bhakti movement in the 20th century, she traces the declining importance of such prominent bhaktas as Chokhamela (a saint of the Mahar caste) and Eknath (a Brahmin, but one who considered himself "the Mahar of the Lord, [or] one who does His work faithfully and with devotion"). In 1956, Ambedkar's conversion and implicit call to Buddhism sought a political reformation where bhakti typically looked for an emotional and philosophical transcendence. As Zelliot has written, "The reasons for a group as politically united, as educationally eager, and as politicized as the Mahars ... for opting for Buddhism instead of Chokhamela and the *bhakti panth* [path of bhakti] are clear. The *bhakti* movement itself in the 20th century was without any social protest or social reform content ... Chokhamela had found joy in equality with other *bhaktas* and in God's sight; the new generation wanted it in social and political matters." (Chokhamela and Eknath: Two *bhakti* modes of legitimacy for modern change" in

other words, that this Dalit identity is itself deliberately and meticulously constructed, its distinctiveness purposefully defined along religious and cultural lines, in order to first name the oppression, and then to unequivocally oppose it. Ilaiah's refusal to 'qualify his statements' and 'nuance his claims,' then, simultaneously acknowledges this constructedness *and* makes the constructed identity virtually immutable. It bears mentioning that if Brahminical culture is smoothed over into a culturally homogenous monolith in this process, then so also is Dalit culture. Elsewhere, Ilaiah writes in fact about the *need* for such homogenization, pointing himself to what we might read as the need for caste to take on the character of an ethnic group: "The post-Mandal period on the one hand conscientized the OBCs, [and] on the other, it began to homogenize SC, ST, and OBCs, at least politically if not socially, and has led to the 'bahujanization' of this social base. This is not to say that such homogenization has already happened in the all-India context, but notionally there is such a mood prevailing and the BSP is working to strengthen it."⁸³ Not only are external difference and opposition fixed, then, but internal differences are smoothed over *at the very least* for the sake of political interest. Barth notes in any case that "the fact that contemporary forms are predominantly political does not make them any less ethnic in character. Such political movements constitute new ways of *making cultural difference organizationally relevant*..."⁸⁴ In this case, the shared kinship of cultural difference becomes an emotively charged opposition to brahminical Hinduism.⁸⁵ And what emerges is not merely a new political alliance, but a

Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements ed. Jayant Lele (Leiden: E.J.Brill 1981)145, 142-3).

⁸³ Ilaiah 1994: 668.

⁸⁴ Barth 1969:34 (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ We might note in passing the racial undertones that also enter this discourse, at least in some parts of the country. In Tamil Nadu, where the anti-Brahmin/'Self Respect'

strident, assertive and deeply politicized *cultural* grouping: an ethnic group within a broader movement that is just as prepared to take on the political establishment as it is to tackle society at large.

three

“Rameeza Bee”

First, a brief account of the known facts. Late one night in March 1978, a woman by the name of Rameeza Bee and her husband Ahmed Hussain were on their way home in a cycle rickshaw. Hussain left the rikshaw for a moment along the way, and while he was gone, Rameeza was accosted by two policemen and taken to the Adikmet station, ostensibly on suspicion of prostitution. There she was raped, first by a sub-inspector and then by three constables. The next morning, two of the policemen took Rameeza home, only to then begin abusing her husband and accusing him of being Rameeza’s pimp. Rameeza and her husband were taken once again to the police station, at which point she told Hussain about the rape. He confronted all four policemen with her account, and was beaten badly on the head, neck, back and stomach. The policemen demanded a Rs.400 fine, and the couple was finally released. Hussain was unable to walk even at the time he

movement began as early as the 1920s, the logic of the Aryan Invasion Theory has long divided society by presumed heritage into upper-caste Aryans and lower-caste Dravidians, imperialist invaders and native inhabitants. These distinctions have since come to dominate politics in the state. The word ‘Dravidian’ is so firmly associated with the South and with southern politics, however, that its implications are not so easily transported to Dalit politics in the North. The Dalit movement elsewhere in India does not make use of the same vocabulary, then, though the idea of Dalits being a distinct racial group remains still an attractive notion. As with the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, Dalit groups today continue to trace a certain kinship to Africans and African Americans, treating the historical politics of caste as equivalent or at least akin to the historical politics of race. Caste draws on a racial identity, it could also be said, to further emphasize both the distinctiveness of caste groups, and the primordality of the oppressions they have suffered. The ethnic character of caste groups becomes all the more evident.

left the station; he complained of a burning sensation and then of unbearable pain. By the time he was taken to a hospital that same afternoon, Ahmed Hussain was dead.

These incidents came to public attention the same evening, when, on the suggestion of neighbors in the locality, Ahmed Hussain's body was carried to the Adikmet police station and kept on the verandah for all to see. People that recounted the incident for me often remarked that the reaction was 'spontaneous,' and most unexpected in its intensity. The Adikmet station was burned and for days after riots flared up in several parts of the city. Buses were burned and railway tracks sabotaged. The police retaliated with fire in places, and 26 people were killed.

The Organization for Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR, a predecessor of the APCLC) conducted an inquiry into the police firings and produced a report: "There are serious allegations made by people in some places that the police used hirelings to burn down public buildings ...they are also accused of trying to fake a "communal conflict" in Dabirpura (Old City) to change the complexion of the anti-police demonstrations."⁸⁶ So soon after Mrs.Gandhi's Emergency, it is perhaps no wonder that both Rameeza's rape and the beating death of her husband were kept strictly within a Civil Liberties frame of reference. Judging from the OPDR comment, even introducing the idea of "communal conflict" seems to have been read as an attempt to evade the real issues of the case. The leader of the MIM⁸⁷, Sultan Salahuddin Owaisi, made a comment in the legislative assembly which apparently tried to 'communalize' the issue, but it was apparently so

⁸⁶ quoted in K.Lalita, "Rape: A case study of Rameeza Bee" (Unpublished Stree Shakti manuscript) 5.

⁸⁷ Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen; until recently, Hyderabad's only Muslim political party, which virtually rules the Old City.

offensive, it was stricken from the record. At any rate, this rape could not have been fully 'communalized,' as one of the three constables involved was himself a Muslim. The issue did remain, for the activists who would soon band together as Stree Shakti, a case of police rape, and for Civil Liberties groups, a case of police brutality. Responding to public pressure, the government set up a Commission of Enquiry under Justice Mukhtadar: functioning in an advisory capacity to the Justice on behalf of political parties and civil liberties organizations was, once again, the lawyer K.G.Kannabiran.

Cases like Rameeza Bee's were what first prompted women's groups, coming together after Mathura's case (1975) and after the Emergency, to lobby for changes in the Rape Law. Rameeza was picked up on the concocted charge of prostitution; the same charge became an excuse the policemen used to force intercourse, and then a defense for the policemen charged with her rape. Even Justice Mukhtadar writes in his report of "suspect women," while chastising the police for their actions: "I would like to bring to the notice of the Government that this Enquiry has brought to light the pitiable condition of suspect women, particularly of poor class, at the hands of the police in a police station. The discussions ... showed how the suspect women are treated by those in position and authority regardless of their physical torture and mental agony."⁸⁸ The range of assumptions about 'consent' and 'loose' women, the issue of whether a prostitute could in fact be raped, the use of character testimony to discredit the victim of rape – all these were issues that seemed quite plainly to indicate serious defects in the Rape Law, and each of these were subsequently addressed by feminists in Rape Law campaigns all over the country.

⁸⁸ Quoted in K.Lalita, Unpublished Stree Shakti manuscript, 13.

So it is surprising – and interesting – that Kalpana Kannabiran (Asmita) would re-read the transcripts of the Mukhtadar Commission in the mid-1990s and deem the defense, and by extension the State that stood behind it, to be ‘communal.’⁸⁹ In order to discredit Rameeza’s character, the defense used religion on the one hand to indicate she was not a good Muslim, and on the other to demonstrate the illegality of her marriages (she had been married twice), in order to prove she was on both counts ‘loose.’ The defense then interviewed a number of prostitutes and pimps to establish that Rameeza was ‘one of them,’ making this a case of nothing more than consensual intercourse with a prostitute. The introduction of Islam into the court proceedings bothers Kannabiran, especially since the MIM had lent its support to Rameeza against the policemen charged: “the interest of [MIM] in the case,” she argues, “put the State on the defensive, and Rameeza quite literally became the ground on which the battle for hegemony was fought all over again.”⁹⁰ There is no doubt, of course, that by the time the Enquiry began, the case had become irrevocably politicized, with the matter being discussed in the Legislative Assembly and opposition parties as usual calling for the resignation of the State government. But to suggest that the case had become ‘communalized’ is to go a step further, to identify the State and all its agencies as evidently *Hindu*.⁹¹ She then continues:

⁸⁹ Kalpana Kannabiran, “Rape and the construction of communal identity” in *Embodied Violence: communalising women’s sexuality in South Asia* ed. Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (New Delhi: Kali for Women 1996) 30-41. I am assuming that this piece is based on the Mukhtadar Commission transcripts, and not those of the actual trial held in Raichur (Karnataka) since Kannabiran only references that source (see fn2). The distinction is important because the Commission saw the need for a trial, whereas the Raichur court acquitted the policemen.

⁹⁰ K.Kannabiran 1996:38.

⁹¹ Oddly enough though, the ‘State’ in this case seems to refer only to the defense and the accused (because they are policemen), and *not* to the prosecution or the presiding Justice, even though all three are in fact integral parts of State machinery.

“from the point of view of the State, non-conformity on the part of Muslims to the tenets of Islam justifies the aggression perpetrated on them by the State in collusion with the dominant community [*ie* Hindus] ...the arguments of the defense and the rhetoric of the [MIM] addressed and reinforced each other, and the fact of Rameeza’s rape and Ahmed Hussain’s death was lost in the process”⁹² Crude and reprehensible though the arguments of the defense were, to suggest that they *justified* Hindu/State aggression against the entire minority community is a very large leap in logic. The defense’s attempt to make Rameeza’s character an issue is after all a fairly standard (if objectionable) move in rape trials, not just in India, but equally in other parts of the world. And the introduction of Islam, or the question of whether or not Rameeza was a good Muslim, was then inextricably bound up with the question of her character. Could not the defense’s recourse to Islam be understood and critiqued along these lines, with reference to the deeply problematic discourses about gender and sexuality that emerge in the context of rape trials? Is it appropriate or even really useful to read this as a battle between two communities (which is what Sultan Owaisi also tried to do), and even more, to use the case to arrive at the somewhat stunning conclusion that violence perpetrated by Hindus against Muslims is legitimized by the Indian State? The very fact that Justice Mukhtadar produced a report that was, by all accounts, ‘impartial’ and was indeed critical of the Police, suggests that there is at least some evidence to the contrary.

Could it be that Kannabiran merely took a pre-constructed position and a pre-determined analysis, and brought those to bear on the facts of the Rameeza Bee case? The idea of the inherent Hinduness of the State on which her argument is based, is, after all, one that has

⁹² K.Kannabiran 1996:37, 38.

recently come into vogue among Indian academicians and theorists, whose long-standing Left/anti-State positioning has become, in the era of Hindu ethnicism, *also* an opposition to religious nationalism. It seems to me that Kannabiran's investment is more to this foregone logic derived from the academic discourses of the present, than to an accurate analysis of the Rameeza Bee case.⁹³ Setting individual motivations aside though, I want to draw from this example entirely another set of questions about activist discourse and Indian academic theory. Why this analysis, why these conclusions, and why now? What might it mean to suggest that today's categories have in fact always been around, and should therefore supercede any others that may have thus far been used to understand social dynamics? These questions are not to suggest that historical analysis of any kind is by definition impossible (since it is necessarily rooted in the present) or that understandings of past events should never be revised or conceptually re-framed. My primary concern here is with identity: if theorists are prepared to acknowledge, as I believe they are, that identity is a historically variable, historically constituted, ever-shifting thing, then what does it mean to transpose modern ethnicist constructions of selfhood onto the conflicts of the past, to insist on the primacy of *ethnic* identities over and above any others? I will return to these questions a little later on in this essay.

four "Chunduru"

Chunduru is a town near Tenali in Guntur District near the Andhra Coast. In early July of 1991, a Dalit (from the Mala community) college student called Govatota Ravi

⁹³ I repeat here Talal Asad's lines, quoted already in a previous chapter: "There are varieties of knowledge to be learnt [and] a host of models to be imitated and reproduced. In some cases knowledge of these models is a precondition for the production of more knowledge; in other cases it is an end in itself, a mimetic gesture of power, an expression of desire for transformation..." (1988:158).

accidentally brushed against a Reddy sitting in front of him in a cinema theatre. This minor incident apparently led to a confrontation between the Reddys and Dalits in the theatre, and soon escalated into a full-scale conflict between the two communities in the town.⁹⁴ Sensing trouble after the theatre incident, Ravi's parents sent him away to a nearby town, but the Reddy youth held Ravi's father captive and beat out of him details of his son's whereabouts and news of his return. They then met Ravi at the railway station in a gang, beat him, forced liquor down his throat, and then took him to the police station accusing him of 'misbehaving' with women in a drunken state. This was actually only one of several similar encounters between Malas and Reddys, but the fact that the Dalit community had united in support of Ravi and his family had angered the Reddys, and for about a month after, the Dalits had to go to Tenali for their provisions, and as far as Ongole in search of work. Then on August 6, some policemen went to the Dalitwada (locality) to warn of an impending attack, instructing Dalit men to leave their homes and run west towards the Tungabadhra canal.⁹⁵ The men obeyed, but found gangs waiting for them, fully armed with knives and axes. Thirteen men were killed, their mutilated bodies put into gunny sacks and thrown into the river.

"Chunduru" properly belongs in several overlapping contexts: the many vestiges of feudal society in parts of Andhra Pradesh; the implementation of reservation policies

⁹⁴ My account of this 'event' is drawn from several sources: Balagopal 1991; V. Kannabiran and K. Kannabiran, "Caste and gender: understanding the dynamics of power and violence" in *Economic and Political Weekly* September 14 1991, 2130-4; Samata Sanghatana's report, "Upper caste violence: study of Chunduru carnage" in *Economic and Political Weekly* September 7 1991, 2079-84; M. Shatruguna, "Toad to 'Raktakshetram': report from Chunduru" in *Economic and Political Weekly* August 24 1991, 1967-9.

⁹⁵ Chunduru's Sub-Inspector of Police was himself a BC, and had apparently taken it upon himself to protect the Dalits in the town. Others under him, however, some say in

which make it easier for Dalits to get college educations and government jobs; the anti-Mandal agitations which brought out hitherto latent upper-caste reactions to reservation programs; the challenge to feudalism in the militant form of Naxalism. The Telangana armed agitation that took place shortly following Independence was predominantly a struggle against feudalism. Militant Communist Party outfits would later pick up where this movement left off, forming the PWG (People's War Group), or Naxalites as they are more popularly known. For the Naxalites, wealthy land-owners and the Police are partners in crime, and against such 'enemies of the public,' violence in the name of revolution is fully justified. The Police for their part frequently attack Naxalites in staged "encounters," and the two groups have created virtual war zones in parts of Andhra Pradesh.⁹⁶ This situation is not unique to the state: in Bihar, for example, which is home to an equally strong radical Left movement, killings of upper caste land-owners and Dalits or tribals represented by Communist Party-affiliated groups alternate with bone-chilling frequency. In both places, conflicts have been largely class-based, emerging most significantly over claims to land ownership, property rights, and access to resources. With the formation of the broadly Marxist APCLC – a group which continues still to support the tactics of the PWG – class conflicts come to be articulated within a human rights frame.⁹⁷

connivance with the Reddys, managed to get him deputed to another area on the day in question.

⁹⁶ Several Telangana Reddy families, for instance, have abandoned all or most of their land holdings in rural areas and sought work in cities like Hyderabad as a result of Naxalite activity. They have been financially unharmed of course, relatively speaking, but their migration was nevertheless forced by the Naxal threat.

⁹⁷ In September 1998, a key group of intellectuals, students, researchers and activists (including K.G.Kannabiran and the APCLC's best-known ideologue, K.Balagopal) broke away finally from the organization over several unresolvable differences, the most important of which was the absence of a structured ideology about the use of violence. The breakaway

Only in the aftermath of Mandal-Chunduru, however, do the *caste* dimensions of such conflicts become important. *Class is caste*, the argument goes, and to separate the two is to be blind to the social reality that incidents like 'Chunduru' chillingly exemplify.⁹⁸ So the APCLC's one-time General Secretary and key ideologue K. Balagopal, writing on the Chunduru carnage, dubs other prior incidents of violence "Other Chunduruses" – even though several have no clear-cut or primary caste-dimension. I quote one brief example from his essay:

At Mandadam in Guntur district, in the second half of 1989, two Erukula tribesmen were abducted, tortured and killed by [the] men of a fishing contractor, for the sin of violating the exclusive contract he had obtained from the government to catch and sell fish in some tanks in and around Tenali. This conflict between various fishing communities with traditional rights over fishing in tanks and canals and government-designated contractors who buy that right in auction, is one major arena of struggle in this state, and has resulted in considerable violence against fishing communities.⁹⁹

Another example describes what appears to be a conflict between tribals and 'non-tribals' ("a heterogenous mixture of cultivating castes") over an 18-acre piece of land that had been awarded by the courts to the former group, once again with no clearly-marked caste axis. Nowhere does Balagopal speak of the activities of Naxal groups and how these may have contributed to or participated in the goonda-rowdy culture of business practice in these regions. He says only that the Naxalites are given "more credit than is truly their due," but this point is debatable, at best, since Balagopal himself looks to the Naxalites –

group calls itself the 'Human Rights Forum,' and as such seems to be more of a watch-group than an activist organization – much like any other modern Indian NGO.

⁹⁸ But how then to account for the fact that there are a great many poor brahmins and a good number of rich BCs and dalits? Writes Tejaswini Niranjana: "As Dalit journalist Gopinath has argued, if there are poor people in all castes, why do only poor *Dalits* carry garbage and nightsoil on their heads? Why do only poor *Brahmins* work as waiters in hotels and not the poor from other castes? ... It should be obvious that a poor Brahmin's social status is higher than that of a wealthy Dalit..." ("Class, Caste and Reservations" in *Economic and Political Weekly* (November 17 1990) 2514.

the phrases “revolutionary groups” and “democratic forces” could refer to no others – for an appropriately militant, politically organized response to Chunduru.¹⁰⁰

The activist tendency *after* the anti-Mandal agitations and local incidents like Chunduru, then, is to read all conflicts or interactions involving people from two different communities as inherently grounded in the oppressive realities of caste. Predictably then, activists also become quite openly concerned with forging militant political unity among lower castes. Tejaswini Niranjana writes of the “mobilization of progressive forces on the basis of caste” and Balagopal of “a militant organization of dalit self-defense, village by village.”¹⁰¹ Caste needs to be emphasized at this particular juncture, they seem to argue, if caste is to be annihilated. A political unity needs to be “fabricated,” writes Balagopal, from caste-fractured communities all around the country. Part of the urgency here probably comes from knowing that caste groups *are* fractured and difficult to unite politically: in other words, from the understanding that the constant dependencies of livelihood “will have far greater strength and stability than one based on revocable political affiliation and sanctioned by the exercise of force and political fiat.”¹⁰² Still, there is the undeniable need to fabricate, even violently says Balagopal, a political unity of castes. And this ‘fabrication’ is then justified and fixed by hearkening back to the purported scriptural basis of modern hierarchy: caste has, after all, always been the special burden of this “benighted land of Manu.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Balagopal 1991:2439.

¹⁰⁰ Balagopal 1991:2405.

¹⁰¹ Niranjana 1990:2514; Balagopal 1991:2405.

¹⁰² Barth 1969:34.

¹⁰³ Balagopal 1991:2405.

Transformed thus into a political entity, caste becomes *the* tool of self-assertion, the primary unit of social analysis and the idea that fundamentally orders Indian social reality, roughly in that order. The emancipatory value of caste in this modern form relies paradoxically on the existence of those very oppressions from which release is sought; hence perhaps the tendency to read all oppressions as essentially caste-based, and the frequent emphasis on the 'timelessness' of the caste-system. But this feature of ethnicism does not, for the moment at least, undermine its political efficacy. Ethnicity retains the privileged position of being the only means by which to respond to the oppressions of the present.

five **the uses of ethnicity**

What does it mean though, to deploy ethnicity as *the* primary signifier and *the* ordering principle of modern Indian society? Why are ethnic identities now considered more crucially relevant to political struggle than any other form of collectivity?

It might appear odd to Indian feminists and activists that I should even choose to pose such questions, for they would appear to undo or work against recent moves in Indian feminist theory. These have sought to challenge the primacy of such 'non-ethnic' categories as 'human,' 'citizen' and 'woman,' establishing that each of these are not homogenous entities, but ones which are fractured by class, caste, and (religious) community. In a 'position paper' on the problem of gender justice in the context of the Uniform Civil Code debates, the Anveshi Law Committee searches out an explanation for why the Indian Women's Movement has "found it difficult to acknowledge difference

and plurality.”¹⁰⁴ The Committee argues that the reasons lie in the privileging of biological difference, which leads – even for those who “accept that ‘woman’ is made, not born” – to the construction of ‘universal womanhood,’ implying that “caste, class and community only tangentially contribute to configuring ‘woman.’”¹⁰⁵ The paper continues:

the attitude of the women’s movement, normed as urban, Hindu, and upper caste-class, has been to address the concerns of the Muslims or the dalits by making some space for the dalit woman and the Muslim woman even while insisting that their ‘primary’ identity is neither dalit nor Muslim but woman ... We propose that by treating gender subordination as structurally similar to caste and community-based subordination (instead of implying that the first is somehow primary – perhaps biological – and the rest are cultural or social), we can begin to retheorize gender away from biology and into the realm of social signification.¹⁰⁶

‘Difference,’ measured along the lines of class, caste, and community, has evidently become *the* ordering principle of Indian feminist theory; gender is now to be variously re-situated in relation to these three contexts. This is clearly as important an advance for feminist theory in India as it was in North America, for instance.¹⁰⁷ So my purpose is not

¹⁰⁴ Anveshi Law Committee, “Is gender justice only a legal issue? Political stakes in the UCC debate” in *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 1-8 1997) 454. The Anveshi Law Committee was formed some years ago, as a forum within Anveshi to discuss legal issues and possibilities for gender justice. The Committee functions much as a study group, reading books and articles relevant to their interests, and meeting every month or so for almost a whole day to discuss the selected texts (which included – during my stay in Hyderabad – work by Gramsci, Foucault, Derrida, Balibar, Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and others). The interests of the Committee now significantly extend to the politics of caste; the group also seems to have re-fashioned itself and its work to draw on an engagement with ‘organic intellectuals’ – most importantly, a Guntur-based lawyer whom many refer to as the ‘young Kannabiran’ for his interest in civil liberties work. More on the Committee’s work later in this paper.

¹⁰⁵ Anveshi Law Committee 1997:454.

¹⁰⁶ Anveshi Law Committee 1997:454, 455

¹⁰⁷ The shift is comparable in some senses to the (late 70s early 80s) shift in North American feminism – brought on by powerful waves of Black feminist critiques – to include race and class in theorizations of gender. And yet, I would argue that the concept of ‘difference’ that comes almost to order Indian feminism is not the same idea that centers the critiques of black feminists and other women of color. In this case, and at that juncture of Western feminist history, it is not ‘whiteness’ or ‘blackness’ that is the central concern, but

to reinstate the 'primacy' of such universal unmarked categories as 'woman' or 'human.' but I am not inclined to take for granted the nature of such newly added categories as 'caste' and 'community' either. Says the paper, "By and large, the manner in which feminists have sought to engage with issues of caste and community has been to incorporate them, but by *blunting their political edge* ... The move has often been one that says it will "not attack or humiliate the minorities" and will remain "committed to their right to a peaceful, dignified life ..."¹⁰⁸ In this, the Committee seems to treat caste and community as always-already 'political' formations that have thus far been *excluded* (or as Susie Tharu has said elsewhere, 'suppressed') from conceptualizations of 'the woman's question.' In other words, the Committee seems to assume that such modern,

the problem of racism within white society and specifically white (bourgeois) feminism (or it is the 'difference' of body and biology, as in psychoanalytic readings). Consider, for example, how bell hooks sums up the issue: "women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. Divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reverie..." (*Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (Boston: South End Press 1984) 44). In hooks' account, differences are but "divisions" or "prejudices" that more nuanced feminist conceptions of oppression can and must overcome; they are not the stuff of which separate cultural identities are fashioned, as in Indian feminist discourse of several years later. That idea of 'difference' enters Western feminism only much later, not coincidentally I believe through postcolonial critiques, which argue to greater or lesser extents the insurmountability of categories of difference.

Nevertheless, the analogy is an interesting one, especially since Indian feminists now write about the "masculinization" of Dalits in popular discourses on caste – "the Dalits [are] only male, the women [are] only upper-caste" – their arguments duplicating those already canonized in Black feminist theory, but never drawing connections to that other body of work and ideas (Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a contemporary theory of gender" in *Subaltern Studies IX*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford 1996) 243). Even the title of the well-known book on Black women's studies, *All the women are white all the blacks are men...*, by itself bears testimony to the possible connections between these two divergent trajectories of feminism (The title continues: *But some of us are brave: Black Women's Studies* Ed. Gloria T. Hull et al, New York: Feminist Press 1981). The differences between caste and race notwithstanding, such connections may have yielded other models of activism, but have not thus far been mined for their possibilities.

politicized groupings have always existed, and that the fault lies with the women's movement for failing to recognize their existence: that is, for failing to recognize the primacy of the ordering principle of ethnicity.¹⁰⁹ This logic does not do away with 'primary' identities, then, but simply replaces one kind of primacy with another, one ordering principle of social reality with another. The move might not blunt any political edges, but it does point implicitly to two further assumptions: that 'difference' can only be measured in secular (a-religious) terms, and that some differences are more valuable than others.

Feminists often remark that the 'normed person' – the citizen-subject, the only true bearer of rights – is urban, Hindu, upper caste, upper class; that this figure and the perspective it represents has dominated feminist politics too until very recently. Now among the primary targets of feminist critique, the figure nevertheless remains the primary point of reference from which and by which 'difference' is measured.¹¹⁰ For where are difference and diversity located if not in non-urban areas, and among communities who are lower class, Dalit, and then non-Hindu? It is important to bear in mind, I think, that when activists talk about incorporating a politics of community or caste into their perspectives

¹⁰⁸ Anveshi Law Committee 1997:454 (*italics added*). The quotations within this passages are from Kumkum Sangari, "The Politics of Diversity: communities and multiple patriarchies" in *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 30 1995) 3387.

¹⁰⁹ Several writers now use the word 'Dalit' to now describe the lower castes all through Indian history. The word is politically correct, to be sure, but even its political correctness places a distinctly modern stamp on the term. Then to use 'dalit' as though it is merely a descriptive term is not merely inaccurate but problematic, especially when the word and its associated political context are freely transposed onto the past, making caste in its modern form appear an ahistorical reality.

¹¹⁰ Or, for that matter, subalternity: as Ranajit Guha writes, the subaltern classes represent "*the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those we have described as the elite*" ("On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India" in *Subaltern Studies I* (New Delhi: Oxford 1982) 8 [sic]).

and their work, they do so partially, and also in secular terms: they are certainly not referring to their own (relatively) privileged outlooks, nor to the 'difference' of perspective, approach and belief that a Hindu ethnicist position (presumed to be upper class/caste) or any other religious ideology represents.¹¹¹ On the contrary, Indian feminist discourse (and generally speaking activist discourse) in Hyderabad seems to suggest that the true or most authentic well-springs of diversity are located on the borders and margins of the mainstream and in the secular discourse of rights. Not Hinduization, says Ilaiah, but *Dalitization*; only the infusion of Dalitbahujan consciousness of labour and productivity into Hindu/Brahminical society and the erosion of homogenizing brahminical 'God-and-leisure' culture could prevent "the very death of plurality."¹¹² We are back again, it would seem, to the familiar opposition of the authentic to the inauthentic, except here there is a place for certain kinds of politics within the realms of the genuine. Here even militant political assertions of Dalit selfhood are then read as authentic, legitimate, and thousands of years overdue, whereas Hindu ethnicism – because it is religious *and* because it is majoritarian – remains inauthentic, inappropriate, and entirely out of place in modern democracy.

six ethnicisms

What are the implications of this discrepancy for activism? Failing to recognize that caste too, and not only religion, can form the basis for the development of militant ethnic

¹¹¹ A group of academicians and activists based in Delhi state the same more simply (in their response to the Anveshi Law Committee's position paper): "Anveshi equates community with minority community and caste with dalit," they write (Amrita Chhachhi et. al. "UCC and Women's movement" in *Economic and Political Weekly* February 28 1998, 488). Their own critique does not go much further, however, for ethnicists are still the clearly identified enemies against which the Indian women's movement must fight, and religion is only acceptable as desacralized identity. More on this in a moment.

collectivities means that activists then do not see these groupings as produced by the selfsame forces operating within the modern democratic nation-state. For if they did, Hindu ethnicity would have to appear as legitimate and as authentic a form of self-assertion (however undesirable it may still be) as the Dalit movement, but clearly this is not the case. Pitting the one ethnicity against the other, and still not recognizing the continuum that links the two, means that activists also cannot really understand the processes by which ethnicisms are mutually constituted, or by which one militant form of ethnicity can spawn several others. Nor will it be possible to see that Hindu and Dalit ethnicisms are in fact structurally similar to one another. It is a widely acknowledged fact among activists that the Dalit movement is largely a product of the Mandal-Masjid years; Ilaiah's work states in no uncertain terms that it is the rise of Hindutva that makes it all the more necessary for Dalits to politically organize. But since the Dalit movement is primarily concerned with distancing itself from Hindutva, emphasizing its unique cultural identity and radical difference from Hindu society, it becomes well-near impossible to point out that the structure, method and functioning of both groups are very similar. This is not a coincidence, but as Barth points out, a most natural outcome when "political groups articulate their opposition in terms of ethnic criteria": "A political confrontation can only be implemented by making the groups similar and thereby comparable ... *Opposed parties thus tend to become structurally similar*, and differentiated only by a few clear diacritica."¹¹³ Not recognizing, then, that there is a kind of 'culture of ethnicity' operating beneath all such group-assertions means that tags

¹¹² Ilaiah 1996a:200; see also 1996b:114-32.

¹¹³ Barth 1969:35 (emphasis added).

of inauthenticity and illegitimacy will always be arbitrarily assigned to designated 'Others,' who in this case are the Hindu nationalists.¹¹⁴

On one level this means that possibilities for alliances between groups are abruptly foreclosed. Feminism in the early 1990s received a series of jolts as activists realized they were being drawn into "disturbing configurations within the dominant culture."¹¹⁵ On one level this meant that 'Rightist' positions on key issues (such as the UCC) were closely approximating those that feminists had held for years; that the 'Hindu Right' had appropriated the language of (feminist) liberalism for its own political and anti-Muslim purposes. The fact that the BJP supported the idea of a Uniform Civil Code in the interests of gender justice made all activist organizations rethink their own positions on this issue, and many completely abandoned the idea afterwards: not having an UCC seemed much more preferable an alternative than having a set of laws that were inherently anti-Muslim. On another level, activists watched as a new kind of feminist subject emerged in the context of Hindu nationalism. Vocal, assertive, visible, politically conscious, this figure was feminist in every sense – except that she was also vocally, assertively and visibly *Hindu*. Write Tharu and Niranjana: "The women leaders of the BJP are not daughters, wives, or mothers of deceased male leaders. They are there in

¹¹⁴ The reverse would not be true, of course: since Hindu nationalists do not define themselves against Dalits (they consider Dalits to be Hindus too), from their point of view Dalit self-assertion is not labeled as 'inauthentic', but says something to them about the fractured nature of *Hindu* society, and the difficulties of forging a unity amongst all *Hindus*. The writer Ram Swarup has suggested in fact that Dalit conversion to Buddhism is not a departure, but a move very much in keeping a broader Indian religious tradition which has been transformed itself by the yoga and sadhana of Buddhism. Swarup is far from oblivious to the modern contexts of such conversions, but he sees the Dalit solution of choice as a move that would "strengthen sanatana dharma [the eternal dharma] itself" rather than reducing the strength of contemporary Hinduism (Swarup 1999).

¹¹⁵ Tharu and Niranjana 1996:233.

their own right and seem to have carved out distinctive political roles and identities for themselves ... More striking – and in some ways more disturbing – than the appearance of this militant individual on the public battlefields of Hindutva is her modernity and indeed her feminism.”¹¹⁶ Even up to the present, women activists speak of the ‘spaces for secular discourse’ being taken away (both Rama Melkote of Anveshi and Vasanth Kannabiran of Asmita used this phrase repeatedly in interviews); of the terms and the framework of debate being co-opted by Hindutva ideologues. The liberalism of Hindu ethnicity eats into and fundamentally challenges feminist liberalism. As Susie Tharu once said to me when I told her of plans to meet and interview BJP ideologues in Delhi, ‘you might find that they are more feminist than thou.’¹¹⁷

This looming threat of co-optation – not just by a faceless State this time, but by a State understood to be *Hindu* – has led women’s activists directly towards the very questions confronting classic liberal theory: for instance, on how to deal with non-liberal minorities within liberal society. The Anveshi Law Committee reiterates that “the issue of the UCC has contributed in a major way to our sense of discomfort with categories of political theory [such as] ‘citizenship,’ ‘secularism,’ ‘modernity,’ ‘community,’ ‘identity’ and even ‘women’s movement’ ... to respond to the current crisis merely as a legal one that can be resolved by drafting laws or setting up a common code is to short circuit these

¹¹⁶ Tharu and Niranjana 1996:248-9.

¹¹⁷ It should be added, however, that these fears often appear specific to Hyderabad. Consider once again the response of the group Delhi-based writers mentioned above to the issue of co-optation (as described in the Anveshi position paper): “[theirs] is an inexplicably monolithic understanding ... how do we oppose our opponents unless we confront them on the very ground that they have marked out for themselves? ... Do we avoid any mention of words like corruption, secularism, liberalization and globalization, since they, too, utter them, however inappropriately? Do we always move out of every single position that we have

questions at our peril..." But because the identity of religious minorities is a stake, because *diversity itself* in the form of these group identities is threatened, activists now argue (at least in Hyderabad) that any desire for legal reform will have to come from the communities themselves, and cannot be imposed from above.¹¹⁸ Anveshi specifically urges an engagement "not only with the formal procedures of the courts but also with processes of conflict resolution that exist outside the established legal domain, such as those initiated by caste panchayats, forums of religious communities, and the informal adjudicatory processes which exist within families and different kinds of communities."¹¹⁹

claimed, just in case hindutva tries to occupy the same territory – and retreat endlessly, with pure and empty hands?" (Chhachhi et. al. 1998:487).

¹¹⁸ Both Anveshi and Asmita share this position, barring some minor differences on what exact role feminists should play in facilitating this process. Kalpana Kannabiran worded her position (and that of Asmita) on the UCC issue thus: "I didn't take a stand on it for a long time. I wasn't sure what I felt about it. For a long time I just kept quiet, and kept listening to arguments for, arguments against. And now I am not for it. Not at all in favor of the Uniform Civil Code. From the work I have been doing I am thinking much more of raising the issue of personal law reform, and maybe the issue of a common civil code will come in at some point in the future, but if it comes at all it will have to be through the agenda of personal law reform. And then a consensus on women's rights. It can't be an imposed consensus" (Interview with Kalpana Kannabiran, December 29, 1997). Her view is not, to my mind, very different from those expressed by the Anveshi Law Committee.

¹¹⁹ Anveshi Law Committee 1997:457-8. Here again the response of Delhi-based feminists has been sharply critical: "Given Anveshi's preference for the rule of both community and caste custom," they write, certain problems emerge. "Community and caste are not identical entities. Anveshi talks of the need to protect dalit cultural difference, but dalits are already subsumed under Hindu personal laws. Who is to be privileged [the Hindu or the dalit]? Again, if dalit groups want to distance themselves from the community, then how would Anveshi decide to settle this, given the fact that they are equally vocal about community rights? ... in intra-community disputes, who arbitrates, whose custom is upheld, who endows groups or individuals with leadership functions within the community? ... These problems arise because, implicitly, Anveshi equates community with minority community and caste with dalit. Would they grant the same rights to custom and practice where the majority community [Hindus] and brahmanical customs are concerned?" (Chhachhi et al 1998:488). A second response to Anveshi's position paper comes from Geetanjali Gangoli and Gopika Solanki, who point out that the Law Committee does not go beyond its critique of past feminist assumptions about the 'pre-modernity' of 'caste' and 'community'. Consequently, they fault the Law Committee for failing to articulate their own

This is an extremely tall order, of course, but it seems to be the only position women's groups can comfortably take, including religion – to repeat a quote from Talal Asad – “in the only legitimate space allowed to [it] by post-Enlightenment society, [as] *the right to individual* [or in this case communal] *belief*.”¹²⁰ So an organization like Asmita can have a Christmas party each December and an Iftar party each January; women working in these organizations can wear bottus¹²¹, go to temples and say Namaz if they so desire but the ideology of the organization itself cannot and should not be built from these other systems of thought circulating all around. Religion is acceptable when it is privatized, individualized, and secularized: when it is properly packaged, that is, as a facet of *identity* among many others, and not an all-encompassing system of thought, action and belief. And when belief exceeds its allocated bounds of superficiality (as it does with Hindu nationalism) when it becomes a source of meaning in its own right, far more important than the ‘rational’ or secular’ logic of multiculturalism or identity politics, the

understandings of these categories, and “preferring to maintain a discreet silence on whether they feel these can be oppressive and anti-women or not. By omission, they serve to romanticize and homogenize caste and community...” (“Toward Gender Just Laws” in *Economic and Political Weekly* April 19 1997; 854-5). While I would concur that the Law Committee does not sufficiently interrogate such concepts as ‘caste’ and ‘community’ upon which its arguments are fundamentally based, might I also suggest that the present feminist disagreements are not essentially over the Law Committee’s stated position, but over the nagging question of ‘what next?’ All clarifications and corrections aside, there is no fundamental disagreement (as I see it) over the twin arguments that (1) reformist initiatives should come from individual communities or should be developed in consultation with them, and (2) that processes of conflict-resolution should look to extra-judicial processes already in place within these communities. The questions that arise then have to do with the where and how of feminist/activist intervention, the difficulties of working with the still deeply problematic extra-judicial processes that the Law Committee names, the problems of developing a set of laws that do not merely replace one set of essentialisms with another – all issues which cannot be easily handled, but which define a new level of feminist debate.

¹²⁰ Asad 1993:45-6.

¹²¹ Bottus are the marks (or designs) Hindu women customarily wear on their foreheads.

possibilities of dialogue and debate are blocked off. The phenomenon of 'Hindu nationalism' is dismissed outright.

This process of 'othering' Hindu ethnicity has a further – and to my mind more damaging – implication. I have mentioned already that activists often critique 'Hindu nationalism' by naming it an 'upper class/upper caste' ideology that cannot therefore hold any claim to representing the vast majority of the Indian populace. But what happens when it is clear, as it increasingly is, that the practitioners involved are BCs or Dalits? Activists generally attribute the belief of these groups to the aggressive propaganda of the BJP and its affiliated organizations, usually then redoubling their efforts to 'properly educate' the masses. They seem to assume, in other words, that only the absence of adequate literature that exposes the 'real BJP' or explains the evils of religious ethnicity could account for the proclivities of these groups, and so seek remedies in counter-propaganda campaigns. Now given that feminists have lent almost unequivocal support to the Dalit movement, it is nothing less than profoundly ironic that they should regard other forms of (Dalit) self-expression outside that sanctioned secular frame as the unfortunate products of Right-wing propaganda campaigns. The implication seems to be that only certain sanctioned *styles* of self-assertion will even be understood *as* self-assertion; non-conforming 'others' are then categorized as the victims of dangerous misinformation campaigns, who only bear testimony to the continuing 'sanskritization' of Indian society and the hegemonic reach of Hindu culture.

Could it be then that activist commitment is apparently less to Dalits as a group than to a particular *style* of expression, a particular *mode* of operation, complete with an

appropriate and acceptable rationality, which those within the Dalit movement closely approximate, but Hindu ethnicists do not? Could it be that Left/activist discourse seeks to establish its own kind of hegemony? For if this is the case, then it becomes somewhat easier to understand why activists do not recognize their own participation in the production of ethnicist discourses. One style and one underlying rationality is pitted against another, the basis of one movement denounced because there religious identity exceeds its bounds, and the basis of another movement lauded because there identity retains its proper packaging. The fact that *both* are products of the same culture of late capitalism, globalization, or the upheavals of young nation-states; the fact that *both* share in a common 'culture of ethnicism' is permanently obscured as a result.

seven institutions

The category of 'complexity' does not, of course, reference any of this. 'Complexity' references the *acknowledged* challenges that the Indian women's movement (and activist groups in general) face from their ethnicist 'others'; it is a statement about the impasses of modern Indian feminism and about the desire for retreat from the simplistic oppositions of grassroots activism. The need for an institutional setting becomes necessary also at this juncture, when it is no longer so easy to keep things in order, when it is no longer possible to treat gender *only* as a gender issue, and when the messiness of social reality erupts in impossible contradictions (between gender and religion, for instance, or gender and caste). But contradictions only appear when there are already an established set of operational norms; these are perspective-bound entities and not permanent fixtures within society. So the institutions which are meant to provide a space and a framework from which to work through the emerging imponderabilia of the Indian

social landscape only serve to reproduce the very assumptions that created the contradictions in the first place. A set of assumptions about the proper place of religious faith in secular society, combined with a given opposition to the State, and a pre-determined analysis of ethnicism are merely *institutionalized*, and never themselves interrogated as potential causes of emerging contradictions. So, although the emphasis on research and women's studies might appear to indicate otherwise, it is the positioning of the activist within the ramparts of the institution that effectively bars any consideration of ethnicism as an object of study. The result is that ethnicism (whether Dalit or Hindu nationalist, but especially the latter) is never mined for the fears, frustrations and aspirations it might represent, and not certainly for the dissatisfaction it might express about the strictures of available social theory.

In lieu of a conclusion, I reproduce here a rather odd verbal exchange that took place during an Anveshi-organized event in July of last year, for the comment it makes on the widening gap between intellectual/activist discourses on the one hand and Hindu ethnicist/popular discourses on the other. The event was a panel discussion on 'Secularism,' which followed a meeting of some members the *Subaltern Studies* group who were interested in compiling a volume on the topic for publication. Three members – Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey and Gautam Bhadra – participated in this public discussion, which was held in an auditorium at Telugu University in Hyderabad. The attending crowd was not large, but several people there who did not belong to Anveshi's usual 'circle of friends' were also present, perhaps having read the announcement in local newspapers. During the question-and-answer period, a young man in the audience asked if he could speak in Telugu. The man was obviously Hindu, though his caste background

was unclear. What I reproduce below is a translation of his question and the exchange that ensued. I will refrain from commenting myself, except to recall the comment of a fellow graduate student who was also present at this meeting: there was not a person in the hall at that time who was tolerant of this man or of his question, she said, but these *are* the kinds of questions that are on most people's minds, and they are just not taken for what they are.¹²² Mundane, overdetermined, and problematic as the man's question may have been, it points to the fault-lines in intellectual/activist discourse which never asked what kind of answer might have been more appropriate or useful, but insisted all the more forcefully on the validity of established explanations. The activist response was to begin more translations of the usual academic writings into Telugu – or to see the problem in the barrier of language rather than a barrier of concepts and categories.

Here, then, is the exchange:

Man from the audience: Can I ask my question in Telugu? ... [some confusion] Telugu? Can I ask? ... I am a common man. [speaking in Telugu] I have not been all the way to Delhi or Ayodhya. In Hyderabad, if you watch a cricket match on television, when Pakistan wins ... my close friend, my *Muslim* close friend, when he sends sweets and distributes sweets, what must I do? ... In other countries, what do other people do? [in English] In secularism way, tell me. That's all.

Chatterjee: I don't know Telugu but I have understood the question. [chuckles] Let me tell you a story. I was – I still am – a major football fan. In Calcutta about fifteen years ago, I think in the late seventies, early eighties ... [the man from the audience interrupts: talk about Hyderabad, he says] Yes, yes. I will come to it, I am answering your question. In Calcutta during a major football tournament it just so happened that there were no Calcutta teams playing in that match, the Calcutta teams had been defeated earlier. The match was between a team from Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a team from Jalandhar in Punjab. This was a national tournament and these were the teams playing the finals. There was a large crowd, a Calcutta crowd. They were all supporting the Dhaka team. Naturally – I mean there was complete, spontaneous response that they supported the Dhaka team. I remember that evening after the match the coach of the Jalandhar team complained in the press that we are playing in India, a foreign team is playing and the local crowd was supporting the foreign team.

¹²² My thanks to Lisa Mitchell for the insight.

The Calcutta press the next day went into a long explanation to say that it was perfectly natural for that crowd which was a Bengali crowd to support a Bengali team, although it was a foreign team, and this did not mean that the political loyalties of this group was for some other country. Now the question I want to raise is precisely the way in which the idea of nation, its equation with the political entity of the state, how that completely rules out any other possibility. This is what in some ways is the criticism we are trying to make – it does not mean that if you feel that the Muslims of Pakistan are our brothers, and in some ways culturally related to us, and we feel some affinity towards them, it does not mean that this is a political loyalty which will be transformed into a loyalty for another state. Just as the loyalties of the Bengali peoples in West Bengal may well be for a cultural affinity with the Bengalis of East Bengal in preference to Punjab. But it does not mean that it is a political disloyalty to the state. This is the question I wish to raise that in some ways, the equation which is being insisted upon, that every single citizen of India, in every single aspect of its emotional and life and feeling must be completely enclosed and exhausted by the single form of the nation state and the given power of the nation state – this is precisely what we are objecting to, this is an objectionable and tyrannical, oppressive form of nationalism.

Man from the audience: [somewhat irked, in Telugu] Your answer is not appropriate to my question. Because you are talking about Bengal ... [in English] Bengal and Dhaka is Bengali people, it is over. But in Hyderabad, where Muslim and Hindus are living together, my brother, my brother Muslim supports Pakistan player. I can't accept! I can't accept!

Chatterjee: But it is not a war ...

M: ...I will kill him! If he supports Pakistan player I will kill him.¹²³ Because of nation, because of nation, not Hindu-Muslim. This is one fellow who is living in India, who supports Pakistan, I will kill him! It is but natural ...

C: This is what I was suggesting, it is not natural.

M: ... But natural ...

C: [emphatically] *It is not natural.*

M: You won't love India?

C: Sorry?

M: You won't love India?

¹²³ Though the man is quite animated by this point, the threat to kill is not a literal one. However odd this may sound to readers, this is a fairly commonly used threat in the Indian context, by both young adults and school children, almost never with any serious intent.

C: A cricket match is not a war.

M: No. not like that. Anybody who is a Muslim, he prays Mecca. I will support. I will support. [in Telugu] prayer to Mecca. bowing to Mecca, I will support. But Pakistan ...

Woman Activist. grabbing the microphone: Chairperson, I would like to ask a question, and I don't think this kind of a debate can go on. There are a lot of people who have questions. You should allow others to speak also ... [the man continues to talk loudly, though his words are inaudible because he no longer has the microphone] ... no, no, but you have spoken already three times, please give a chance to others ... that's enough, but I have not spoken once ... there are many others. Okay, may I ... will you please allow me to ask a question? You have got your answer you can go ... will you please allow this meeting to go on. [more interruptions] others are there to ask questions ... what nonsense.

M: ... excuse me!

Activist: You can't ask questions like this...

CHAPTER THREE

ETHNICIST GENEALOGIES

In *Brhadaranyaka* 5.1., Lord Prajapati speaks in thunder three times: 'DA DA DA'. When the gods, given to pleasure, hear it, they hear it as the first syllable of *damyata*, 'control'. The antigods, given as they are to cruelty, hear it as *dayadhvam*, 'be compassionate'. When the humans, given to greed, hear it, they hear it as *datta*, 'give to others' ...¹

one introduction

When an uncle first suggested a visit to Delhi to meet and interview BJP ideologues, I resisted. Funds would be a problem. I rationalized, and besides, my project was not supposed to be about the ideology of the Sangh Parivar itself, but about refractions of this ideology, and interpretations of it in environments far removed from such centers of influence and authority as New Delhi. Even when I finally spoke to my uncle, many months later, about accompanying him on a visit to the capital, I still assumed that the most interesting sites for research had to be elsewhere. I had spoken to Sultan Owaisi of the MIM in Hyderabad (with Kalpana Kannabiran), and spent a morning with Andhra's famous sweet merchant-turned State unit VHP leader, G. Pulla Reddy, and had come away both times wondering if such brief interactions with politicians or political figures could ever yield much more than the usual positions, the usual arguments, the usual campaign-style rhetoric. And for more on these positions and these arguments I only had to look as far as the daily newspaper, or a little further to the vast amount of literature disseminated by various Party offices. There was no shortage of information, especially on the Sangh Parivar: as a friend who once helped me find some taped campaign speeches said, these groups are quite openly proud of everything they do. What, then, did

¹ Ramanujan 1989:53.

I hope to achieve in Delhi? To some extent, I suppose I wanted to hear the arguments from the horse's mouth, as it were. Some of these – like the VHP-propagated idea that Muslim families have more children because polygyny is permitted according to the Shariat – are repeated so frequently in ordinary conversation that I wanted to be able to determine if Sangh Parivar ideologues believed it themselves. What was their investment in this mythology? What was its purpose? What understanding did *they* have of its repercussions? How did they respond to critiques – by now substantial – from the Left? Being this time not merely another student researcher, but someone with personal connections through my uncle (who has been Educational Advisor to the Indian Army for some years now), I had hoped perhaps that I would be able to move beyond the usual levels of discourse.

I continued to assume, however, that there *was* a 'horse's mouth,' or a most authentic source of Hindu nationalist ideology that I now had the opportunity to properly access. "Will the real BJP please stand up?" is a question often asked in media debates and political discussions, and I perhaps thought I was on my way to finding an appropriate answer.² It would take me a trip to Delhi to fully understand that there is no such thing as a 'real BJP,' but one constantly in the process of being re-configured according to the needs of the moment by party members, ideologues, supporters, and critics, often *within* those most authentic centers of influence and authority. It would take me a trip to Delhi to recognize that the privilege of interpretation does not rest only or even primarily with those who are at the receiving end of political ideologies, that the Sangh Parivar too represents a range of ideas, positions, and postures, not all of which are always in perfect

² Kuldip Nayar, "Will the real BJP stand up?" in *Indian Express*, January 20 1998.

consonance with one-another. On one level, this might appear an obvious and widely-acknowledged fact: Prime Minister Vajpayee is often touted as the representative of the BJP's "moderate" face, for example, an observation that would appear to indicate that the BJP indeed has more than one 'face.'³ And yet, on another level, even this "moderate" face is frequently said to deliberately *conceal* a much harder, 'right-wing' core, or of being puppeteered behind the scenes by the more conservative RSS. All dissent or difference of opinion with the stated Party line is then said to be 'suppressed,' in keeping with the more 'real' hidden conservatism within. This perspective would have observers believe that there is 'really' only one BJP, but that this is carefully screened from view by a surface layered with moderation and liberalism. It seems to me, however, that such assessments reveal more about positions of *opposition* to ethnicist politics – about the stereotypical fears evoked by ethnicism – than they express about the ideology or functioning of any particular organization. My own starting point, then, is to suggest that there are no exclusive sources of Hindu nationalist ideology, but that in fact this ideology is always-already embroiled in contestations, negotiations, and processes of re-configuration, from above and from below, from within and from without. As such, this essay makes only a tenuous claim to delineate the Hindu ethnicist position. In some sense, it is no more than an account based on conversations and impressions gathered during a few weeks spent in Delhi.

two interpretations

The available literature on Hindu ethnicism, falls broadly into two categories: first, the writing by the Sangh Parivar's own ideologues, which addresses not just an internal

³ See, for example, the editorial "BJP unmasked" (*Deccan Chronicle* December 6

audience of supporters; and second, the work of activists, researchers, and other outside observers interested in understanding ethnicism (as I have suggested in a previous chapter) largely for the purposes of critique. This essay will attempt to move away from *both* these positions, and *both* these modes of understanding. Neither am I interested in setting the record straight, or putting together an 'authentic' or 'true' account of Hindu nationalism to answer its critics, nor obviously do I want to produce yet another exposé on the evils of rightist politics or the legitimacy of one kind of historical understanding over another. What agendas or what perspectives translate into positions of support for ethnicist politics? What varied promises does ethnicism appear to carry? What does ethnicist ideology capitalize on or draw out in its practitioners? What varied 'ends' does ethnicist ideology apparently provide the means to achieve? These are the questions that will provide a frame of sorts for the present writing. To keep this from becoming merely a catalog of varied interpretations, however, I would like to focus on one theme, one underlying structural principle that I believe functions to order ethnicist ideology, and which unites, to lesser or greater extents, the multiple 'uses' of ethnicism. This principle has no single name, suggesting that it, too, is multiply constituted and that it is less a single idea than a continuum that several words may help describe: love, devotion/*bhakti*, patriotism, faith, belief, affection, sentiment, nationalism. Linking these concepts thus allows me to avoid the usual academic judgements about the authenticity or inauthenticity of ethnicist consciousness, and to access realms in which the 'tabooed' mixing of religion with politics/nationalism occurs quite normally. The continuum also provides an important means of linking such apparently unrelated things as nationalism and the everyday practice of religion, so that belief in ethnicist ideology becomes a

1997). Articles with similar titles are fairly common in all the Indian dailies.

natural extension of belief in everyday life, and not the extra-ordinary product of some insidious campaign of indoctrination. The mundane becomes a facet of the uncommon, the familiar an aspect of the distant, the 'here' an intrinsic part of the 'there.' And then of course the reverse happens too: daily life becomes irrevocably transformed.

three **"romance"**

To explore the continuum, then, I begin with what I realize in retrospect was my own starting point: a chance encounter with a retired Army officer, General Virat Kapur, a mere three weeks before the end of my year of fieldwork.⁴ I met General Kapur very briefly at his home in Delhi because my uncle wanted to pay him a visit. Conversation was light. The General gave my uncle copies of a talk he had recently given, a copy of his new book, and a tape-recorded speech delivered not long before to cadets at the National Defense Academy (NDA). He then asked us to come to a conference at the India International Center that was to be held later in the week on environmental issues in the subcontinent. We ate an apple each, drank some water, and left. I never met the General again, though I did hear him speak at the conference, and remember being moved by the intensity behind his rather quiet and gentle manner of speaking. But it was not the talk at the India International Center, nor the brief meeting at his home that prompt me now to include General Kapur in this essay. Rather, it was another coincidence, that I happened to overhear his tape-recorded talk to the NDA as my uncle listened to it one afternoon on my portable Panasonic player. The talk was on 'Reviving the Romance of Soldierly,' and I had not thought I would be particularly interested. Here are some excerpts:

How do you describe romance? What do I mean by romance? Surely it is not the romance that we read about in novels, or that you see in the Bombay or Hollywood films. This has to be a deeper, a more meaningful romance. And the first thought that came to me as I was floundering for an answer ... I just happened to be sitting and writing something and I heard Mirabai's bhajan. And I realized how Mirabai had *immersed* herself in the love of something which I can't still define! The ecstasy of the bhajan came to me, and I just remembered those two-three lines: *Mira ke Prabhu, geher gambheera/ dhiraj rakh adhidhira/ aadhi raath mohe darshan dena/ prem nadi ke teera.*⁵ And I said, where did this lady get immersed, what 'prem nadi,' and what darshan is she looking for? Is that where romance lies? In that total immersion in something that is bigger than you? I didn't know.

I got an opportunity about 18 months back to deliver a talk in Paris. And I went and called upon ... an 87 year-old man whom I had the privilege of knowing, and who had befriended me ... he was the famous ocean explorer, Jacques Cousteau ... I had kept meeting this man over the years – a very puny man to look at, with small, frail shoulders, but the heart of a lion. In November 1995, I went to the old man. He took me out for lunch, and I spoke to him for hours, and I asked him, 'Commandant Cousteau ... how do you manage, at the age of 80, to go diving? Your book on ocean exploration has excited a whole generation of marine biologists... how do you manage?' And he told me, for an hour or more, of his abiding romance with the sea... so he gave me an idea of what romance and abiding commitment is all about. I think the old man knew his time had come because he told me, he said 'mon General, now my romance has shifted. My romance is with the next generation ...'

I was in the Cavalry armored core ... but when I was the wrong side of fifty, [the army] posted me to command the mountain division. And I went around by helicopter to begin with, to familiarize myself, and in vehicles, and I had my first real look at the Himalayas. And I was *stunned* by the grandeur. I had been a very proud cavalry man. I was privileged to be commissioned to command a very famous regiment. But for the first time in my life, I actually wished, when I walked around those mountains, that I had gone into the infantry. It would have allowed me to walk through those wondrous mountains for all my life. And I walked and I walked. [...] I gave up the helicopter, and followed, for the distance I could, the journey of Guru Nanak. He went into Tibet ... and you find as you go into North Sikkim, there is a temple and a tree that marks a spot where he stopped. And then another 16,000 feet before you cross into Tibet, there is a lake called Guru Dongma which doesn't freeze though all the land around is frozen. He walked this land as an ordinary man, and his spirit still lingers there.

⁴ All names in this paper have been changed, except of course those of well known public figures.

⁵ A rough translation would be: "Meera's Lord is stoic and impenetrable/ Have courage, O unstable heart/ Grant me an audience in the dark depths of night/ On the banks of my love-river." The lines are typical of *bhakti* poetry, which often transformed romance into worship.

And he came back and left a message for humanity. So also did Vivekananda, who again fired humanity with his vision. He walked the mountains; he went into the Himalayas. They filled his soul and spirit with joy. There you are; this is the type of romance I was talking about. And then it had to be a total immersion ...

At the beginning of this century a youngster like you – his case must have gone to the privy council, he must have been a young revolutionary, he must have thrown a bomb at some Britisher ... and he said at his trial when he was sentenced to die, “my only wish is to be re-born of the same mother. and die for the same cause until [India] stands free, for the good of humanity and the glory of God. Vande Mataram! [salutations to the motherland].” ...Romance. This is the mother he’s talking of, the motherland...⁶

Why do I choose to include these (somewhat choppily assembled) excerpts from a retired General’s address to an assembly of cadets here in an essay that is to be about ethnicist ideology? I include it, for one, precisely because it is *not* delivered by someone who will easily or properly fit the description of being ‘ethnicist.’ Neither is it a term General Kapur would have chosen for himself, nor is it perhaps one (given its various associations and connotations) that best describes his positioning. And yet, here in these passages is a smattering of every theme and idea that appears consistently in ethnicist discourse: the fiery nationalism, the infusion of religious spirit into nationalist sentiment, the love for country born in part of profound appreciation for its beauty, the idea of the motherland as deity and the object of veneration – of motherland as holyland – and finally the impossibility (that the General goes on to speak about) of soldiery without this ‘romance’ with the land. Still, my purpose here is not so much to indicate that there are these points of intersection with ethnicist discourse, but to draw attention, as the General does, to the thread that connects each of his examples: *the complete immersion in something larger than oneself*, an idea which (not coincidentally I think) is central to the Indian conception of *bhakti*. For Mirabai, the 12th century saint-singer from Rajasthan, this ‘something’ was her Lord Krishna; for Cousteau, it was the ocean; for the soldier, it is the motherland.

The continuum draws listeners ultimately towards aspects which are perhaps more recognizably nationalist, but encompasses also other elements like Cousteau's work and Mirabai's music that have nothing *as such* to do with patriotic feeling. It draws listeners towards aspects of the familiar, in other words, by establishing connections between the known devotion of Mirabai to the imagined wonder of a saint travelling in the mountains, and then to the imaginable passions of a lifelong commitment to a kind of work.⁷ And then, by the same logic, it makes a small shrine somewhere in North Sikkim important to those hearing about it in New Delhi, tracing the origins of some elements of Sikhism and reformist Hinduism to the mountains, and quite literally to the land itself.⁸

I am interested in General Kapur's talk for the connections it makes, but beyond that, for the connections it allows listeners to make through this concept of "romance." The largeness of the idea struck me then: nothing, it seemed, could ever be excluded from this category, no form of love, no strong commitment or sentiment. I paused from the work I had been trying to do as the tape played, and remembered suddenly the tenderness with which my mother once described the feet of a sage she had just seen ("they are so

⁶ My thanks to the General for his kind permission to use his talk in this work.

⁷ The idea of work as itself a means of worship is not something foreign in the Indian context, though General Kapur does not refer specifically to the Indian concept of *karmayoga*. 'Karma' literally means work, and yoga "the art of conscious self-finding" (Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press [1962] 1970) 36). But the concept is clearly more than the sum of its parts: the "upward transference of our centre of being and the consequent transformation of our whole existence and consciousness, with a resultant change in the whole spirit and motive of our action, the action often remaining precisely the same in all its outward appearances, makes the gist of the Gita's *Karmayoga*" (Sri Aurobindo [1922] 1970: 239).

⁸ Often, ethnicist ideologues will describe the importance of the State of Kashmir in these terms, speaking of the emergence and growth of Sikhism/ Sikh culture in that region, for example. The move is significant as it shifts away somewhat from the usual 'secular' explanations, or the standard argument that the Muslim-majority Kashmir should not go to

small!," she had exclaimed, "and so beautiful – like a child's feet"), and the sheer thrill with which my father-in-law would sometimes take in the lyrics of a Tyagaraja kriti (song), sometimes explaining them to me as he knew I would be listening to the music too. This stuff of daily devotion is itself a kind of "romance," and from here an attachment to monuments and the landscapes in which they stood, from which they had grown, is but a few steps away.

four patriotism

I had not heard of the Surya Foundation before that November day when my uncle and I are taken first to its offices in Panch Vihar, and then to its school in Haryana (outside Delhi) which everyone seems to refer to simply as "the farm house." My uncle too identifies the organization only through a television jingle about Surya light bulbs, which is one of the company's many products. But we both know that this was what the media would have dubbed an 'RSS organization,' drawing heavily on all the immediate reactions such a pronouncement would invoke. And that we are to visit that evening what would be called – again in popular parlance – an 'RSS school.'

Some contextualization is perhaps appropriate at this juncture. The RSS (formed in 1925) is known primarily for its adherence to "Hindutva" or Hindu nationalist ideology, and for its somewhat military style of internal functioning. By the group's own admission, the character of the RSS is not political but *cultural*, its primary concerns being education and character-building in service of nationhood. The group did not, however, bar itself from participation in politics: the Jana Sangha, the political wing of

Pakistan since that would be re-affirm of the logic of Partition, and undermine the 'secularism' that India stands for.

the RSS, was formed in 1931 by an ex-Hindu Mahasabha leader. In the years before 1947, the RSS' activity was directed mainly towards uniting Hindus into a community of trained nationalists whose reformed social attitudes would put them at the forefront of anti-colonial struggle and on the cutting edge of social change.⁹ The group's one-time association with Nathuram Godse – Gandhi's assassin – would, however, prevent the RSS from gaining respectability in the eyes of the Indian public at least until a decade after Independence. Indira Gandhi's defeat in the elections following her infamous Emergency in 1977 brought the Janata Party into power, and it was at this juncture that the Jana Sangha (and through it, the RSS) had its first, and somewhat difficult, experience with populist politics. For the group's respectability, even at that time, was anything but uniform. Attacks on the Jana Sangh for its strong ideological ties to the RSS, and fears that the Sangh would utilize the vast organizational resources of its parent body to strengthen its own (already considerable) political position within the Janata alliance led to a crisis within the ruling party. Following the Janata Party's own electoral losses in 1980, the Jana Sangh withdrew from the alliance, re-fashioned itself into an independent political organization, and re-named itself the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. Ties between the present-day BJP and RSS are still strong – most top-level BJP members receive at least some of their training through the RSS, and some would argue that important organizational decisions within the BJP are not taken without consultation with the RSS – but the RSS has continued to reject any possibility of direct participation in electoral politics.

⁹ see Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder: Westview Press) 1987:10-11.

This decision, while it may have helped the RSS retain its original focus on cultural activism away from the pulls and pushes of populist politics, has also helped create (perhaps inevitably in an increasingly polarized environment) the popular impression of the RSS as a secretive, subversive, behind-the-scenes player. In addition, the RSS continues to be the object of strong criticism for its militancy and pro-Hindu stances, and this opposition has only grown stronger in recent decades as the RSS' particular brand of Hindu nationalism comes to be read as exclusively anti-Muslim, in the absence of an imperialist enemy. The image of the RSS today is almost synonymous with images of its shakhas, or morning meetings, which are widely disseminated by the print media, and indeed by the RSS itself: neat rows of men dressed in khaki shorts and white shirts saluting a saffron flag. The ideology of the organization, its views on social reform or education have been greatly overshadowed by the power of such images, which seem to evoke only a deep-seated fear of such ordered, militaristic nationalism.¹⁰ Indeed, it would not be far from the truth to suggest that the Indian intelligentsia generally regards this, or for that matter any other form of public nationalism gratuitous and therefore well-near pathological. The images of RSS shakhas, combined with the group's well-known emphasis on 'Hindu hurt' in the telling of history, have further led critics to assume that RSS schools are the nodes through which deliberately distorted versions of history are propagated, causing irreparable harm to the 'secular fabric' of Indian society. Activists, for example, often express serious concerns about the RSS or VHP setting up more schools and teaching their own versions of history, and so also greatly undermining the efficacy of any kind of 'secular intervention.'

¹⁰ It is necessary to ask, however, from where such fears originate, and whether they are warranted in the Indian context. To some extent Chapter One was concerned with such

This clutter of history, of fact and fiction, of reaction and counter-reaction crowd my mind that morning of our intended visit to the farm house. I feel as though I should settle all the debates beforehand, separate all the entangled positionings, and arm myself as it were with absolute certainty. I want both the broad clarity of distance *and* the intimate clarity of detail. But there is not time enough to even come to terms with the impossibility of the task I have set up for myself, and by the time the car arrives to pick us up, I could not be more confused. I decide, as the young man who comes upstairs to meet us is introducing himself, not to think at all, and simply to let this afternoon take me where it will.

There is another middle-aged gentleman in the car who sits in from with the driver, besides the younger man, Rajeev. Both our escorts work now with the Surya Foundation, and both have received training from the RSS. The slightly older man speaks to my uncle for some time and then turns to me politely. “Aur aap?” he asks; respectfully, “and you?” I repeat what has by now become my standard line of self-description in such contexts: that I am a student, interested in the politics of secularism.

“Secularism?” the man exclaims, almost before I can finish my sentence. And then, shaking his hand vigorously and looking away for a moment: “Ahhhhh...,” sighing, still smiling, not knowing where to begin.

“Have you been to the Qutb Minar complex?” he asks me simply, after a pause. “And the mosque? Built from pillars and stones that were taken from destroyed Hindu temples, with all the idols defaced?”

“She was just there this morning,” my uncle replies for me.

issues of cultural translation, and the questions raised there are of course relevant here also.

“Han?” said the man. “is that so?” – I nod – and then gesturing again, this time forcefully, he continues: “*That* is our secularism, the fact that *that* structure is still there.” Shaking his head, he turns away.

Rajeev looks across at me from the other end of the back seat and smiles.

Soon we are in another part of Delhi, at someone’s house. We are to pick up a VHP leader from Australia who is also interested in seeing the Surya Foundation school, the older man tells us. We wait in the living room, snacking on raisins and cashew nuts while Prakash Desai, the VHP leader, and his wife get ready. They have a suitcase between them as they are to spend the night at the farm house. The older gentleman leaves us at the gate. “Rajeev will take you from here,” he says. At the office in Panch Vihar, we wait again for what seems like an interminable length of time, for the group that is to travel with us to Haryana to assemble. Someone brings in a tea tray, and while we are sipping the sweet milky brew from white china cups with small flowers lining their rims, Mr. Desai proceeds to tell us all about himself. He is a lawyer in Melbourne, it turns out. He pauses in the middle of a thought, wipes his thin moustache and upper lip with a white handkerchief with slow, deliberate dabs, and continues speaking. He gives us several business cards each and explains his various qualifications in a slippery monotone. His wife smiles, looks congenial, and nods periodically, speaking very little in English or in Hindi, apparently quite content to have her husband do all the talking. Later in the evening, Mr Desai will show us photographs taken at VHP functions in Melbourne. These are mostly of women beautifully dressed in saris or salwar kameezes, laying out tables of food in someone’s home or in a club house; of men standing at podiums and making speeches. In such foreign contexts, the VHP seems inevitably to

become an 'ethnic' organization like any other; perhaps among other things, an excuse to meet friends (and incidentally remember a cause), a forum for socializing.¹¹

We escape eventually for fresh air, as others came into the room in search of tea. Rajeev and another young man are standing just outside. Both are polite but reserved, responsive and yet not forthcoming. We are waiting for Jai Prakash-ji, they tell us, he is in a meeting upstairs. Jai Prakash Agarwal is the chairman of the Surya Foundation; the school we are about to visit is apparently his brainchild. We ask more about the school: does the Surya Foundation have many such projects? Actually this is a training center for the Foundation, Rajeev's friend replies. But Vidya Bharati has many more schools in many states.¹² My uncle turns to me: "They must have participated in that Education

¹¹ A few months ago, there was a discussion on FOIL (Forum of Indian Leftists, a predominantly North American group that communicates mostly through electronic mailings) about Pradeep Dalvi's play *Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy (This is Nathuram Godse speaking)* which presents Godse's rationale for assassinating Gandhi, and allegedly glorifies his actions. FOIL was concerned about the play because of its portrayal of a Hindutva viewpoint, and several members were organizing protests at various locations in the United States where this play was due to be staged. But while it was the politics of the play disturbed these FOIL-ers, those actively involved in the protests came back to report (somewhat disgustedly) that most Indians who had gone to see this play had done so less for political reasons than because it was a major social event, 'merely an excuse to wear your best saris and your best jewels,' some remarked.

¹² Vidya Bharati (which means literally 'Knowledge-India') is an RSS affiliated NGO, the largest in the field of education, which runs something like 13,000 schools mostly in the Northern states of India, independently or in cooperation with local groups. It is the country's largest NGO in the field of education.

I do not know it at this point, but will learn soon that the Surya Foundation school provides free education to all the students it admits, and guarantees the boys employment in the organization. They are obligated to work for seven years, and then are free to leave. When I asked why the same opportunities were not afforded the girls, I was told simply that the families often did not want it (and in the RSS model of functioning, family consensus is of paramount importance; inter-community marriages are welcomed, for instance, provided there is some family support (see Brinda Karat, "The Hegdewar 'rekha' for women" in *The Hindu* February 2 1998, for a feminist critique of this aspect of RSS ideology)). In any case, I was told also, the Surya Foundation was not set up as a business to accommodate women. I never understood exactly what that meant, but took it as a cue to cease questioning.

conference,” he suggests.¹³ And then to the young man, “Isn’t it?” “Ji,” he affirms, “yes.” “Do you have a copy of the recommendations that they made?” “Ji,” he replies, “upstairs in the library.” and both young men disappear to find and xerox the requested document. My uncle will ask me, when the document arrives, “Do you find anything seriously objectionable in these recommendations?”

“No, not really” I reply, “except I can’t understand why there should be an emphasis on ‘home science’ for girls ...as if women really need it.”

“Fine, so it is not perfect.” he will suggest in this and so many other occasions, like the time I object to the government’s move to exclude Alfred Noyes’ ballad “The Highwayman” from English curricula for the illicit romance it portrays. “Any serious process of reform will not be without its errors. And such things are very minor.”

Inside, on a magazine rack, is a current issue of the RSS mouthpiece, *The Organizer*.

“Some more information for you,” says my uncle, pointing to the paper. And sure enough, the headlines scream: “Children of Macaulay and Marx sabotage Indianisation of Education.”¹⁴ But before I can read and take in the response, there are some men sitting around us and my uncle is asking about what they teach in the school and why it is different from any other. One of these gentlemen, Mr. Girilal Sharma, would continue this conversation with us all the way to Haryana and all the way back, late that same

¹³ The conference my uncle refers to here is one convened by Vidya Bharati in co-operation with several other “national level apex institutions and philanthropic organizations,” August 1998. The conference produced a series of recommendations on various aspects of education, one of which was curricular reform. The Human Resources Development Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, was to have presented these recommendations at a second conference of Education Ministers and Secretaries in October, but this plan became controversial even before that second conference began. More on this in the section that follows.

night. Content to simply think of him as another ‘RSS man,’ I regret now not having asked Mr. Sharma much about himself. I know only that he was retired, a teacher of Vedic mathematics, and a close associate of the Surya Foundation. He talks at some length about Vedic mathematics – the principles involved, the ease of imbibing these, the importance and efficacy of such training – and about the need for a kind of education that involves both mind and body, the rational, the traditional, the spiritual. He speaks in measured tones, arms folded across his kurta, moving only his head to emphasize a word or an idea.

“Language?” asks my uncle.

“We teach Sanskrit,” answers Mr. Sharma, “there is no doubt that Sanskrit should be the national language of India, and the propagation of spoken Sanskrit is important. People think Sanskrit is a dead language because the Europeans have told us so, because foreign scholars think it is so. It is important to dispel such myths. Every single Indian language spoken today has some connection to Sanskrit. Why not draw on those connections?”

“But what about Urdu?” I blurt out, and then suddenly feel self-conscious and rather silly. This is a standard objection, the logic behind which leads inexorably to the same debates that have been rehashed incessantly since the idea of Partition was born. Urdu did not become a specifically *Muslim* language until it was clear it could no longer be the exclusive language of government and power. My question presupposes that Urdu *is* inherently a Muslim language, and as such, the logic behind it could lead only one of two ways, I think: towards a rationality of Partition, or towards yet another weary discussion of cultural mosaics and composite cultures. I want to take the question back or at least to ask it another way.

¹⁴ *The Organiser*, November 1 1998.

But Mr. Sharma interrupts my panic: "Urdu will continue to be taught and learned," he says simply. "just like any other regional language continues to be taught and learned though Hindi is the national language."

Later, my uncle will ask an assembly of students at Lady Shriram College in Delhi, where he has been invited to lecture: "Where else in the world is Urdu spoken? Is it spoken in Saudi Arabia or in Iran? Is it Hindu or is it Muslim? ... What about the thumri? (thumri is a specific musical style) Hindu or Muslim? Where, except in India, are thumris sung?"

His point is very simply that there is a culture peculiar to the subcontinent, one that had loosely demarcated its own geographic boundaries before the political entity called "British India" ever came into being, and that exists still in important ways, in spite of Partition. This is not a reference to such notions as 'cultural mosaics' or 'composite cultures,' for those ideas are the products of Partition itself, less about tracing cultural links than about separating and footnoting who contributed what.¹⁵

¹⁵ A Muslim gentleman, asking a question at the Anveshi "Panel on Secularism" defined "composite" thus: "if you will read the whole literature that has been produced in the 40s, you would know what composite means. The kind of literature which was being produced particularly in Urdu was something which clearly reflected what composite meant. Because there were elements from Sanskrit, from Persian, from Arabic, in the same work of art! Would you not call it composite?" See also Javed Alam's comments on the subject (in "Composite Culture and Communal Consciousness: The Ittehadul Muslimeen in Hyderabad" in *Representing Hinduism: the construction of religious traditions and national identity* eds. Vasudha Dalmia and H. von Stietencron (New Delhi: Sage 1995) 338-68). Alam speaks of the notion of "composite culture" as a fragile construct, something that could exist only for as long as there was no "intervention from above" (340) or conscious deliberation on its meaning or composition. Alam draws no direct conclusion from these observations, but I believe his analysis of the MIM in Hyderabad establishes quite clearly that notions of 'composite-ness' and increased communal identification go hand-in-hand: in other words, that 'composite-ness' emerges paradoxically only in contexts of increased polarization or when "Hindus and Muslims ...increasingly come to live in their own different social worlds" (344).

“Questions like language, law and so many others – these have become very political issues when they need not be so,” concludes Mr. Sharma.

When we arrive at the farm house, I see Jai Prakash Agarwal (JP from here on) for the first time, as he and some others have followed us in another Tata Sumo. But there are no introductions made. Instead, this thin, dark, somewhat wiry looking man plunges himself wholly into the routine of the school, and those of us that have come to visit must learn quickly to keep pace. The sun is setting over grasslands in the distance, and students are playing volleyball in the field between schoolhouse buildings. They come eagerly to greet us, and touch each of our feet in a traditional gesture of respect (reserved for elders and gurus), grinning and laughing the whole time. I am unused to this and want to shrink away, but they find me all the same and force me into their game. JP tells them who we are and asks about each of them, kneeling and putting his arms over shoulders. We walk briskly down the length of the game field twice before it is time for the anthem and the end of a day's work. When both teachers and students have assembled and arranged themselves into neat rows for the singing, I notice that none of these children could be more than fifteen or sixteen years old, and that there are far fewer girls than boys (The center, I will learn later, has only recently been opened up to girls). In total, there seem to be no more than about fifty students. A brief prayer, the anthem, and then: “Vande Mataram!” The group disperses to get ready for dinner.

We start over for a tour of the school. The place is vast: a few incidental buildings at the end of what seems like an unnamed road, in the middle of an expanse of fields cloaked with haze before a setting sun. At the entrance, near where our cars are parked, a



Figure 7 Bharatmata or Mother India

“This is just like the army,” my uncle comments, seeing the neatly made rows of beds with sheets and blankets folded at one end.

“And like Rishi Valley,” I add, having lived in a boarding school myself and had teachers walk through our rooms several times each day to make sure we made our beds, washed our clothes, tidied our cupboards, and did not read by torchlight after lights were out.

“Although this seems far more spartan.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Rishi Valley School is part of a chain of institutions (others are in Chennai, Bangalore, Benaras, Pune, Brockwood Park in England, and Ojai Valley in California) founded by Jiddu Krishnamurti, a philosopher who was ‘discovered’ on the streets of Madanapalle, close to where the school is now located, in the early part of the century by members of the Theosophical Society of India. The place is called Rishi Valley after the Rishis or sages who are said to have found in the Valley’s vast beauty an ideal place for their work. I cannot of course summarize the school’s educational philosophy in a footnote, but two important marks of distinction were its focus on a well-rounded *cultural* education, and on the development of critical thinking, a process facilitated by close, informal relationships between students and teachers. Krishnamurti is named coincidentally by P.D.Chitlangia, in a speech he was to have delivered at the Education Ministers’ conference. The speech is cited and discussed later on in this paper.

painting of the subcontinent, with a goddess standing over it. This is Bharatmata, Mother India, a lion behind her, a flag in one hand and the other raised to bless and dispel fear (abhaya mudra). JP points out the painting to us; it is the core idea around which the school functions, and the students pay homage to it daily. We see the performance hall, classrooms, computer center, the dormitories.

Along hallways are photographs of people who have come to visit the place, and among these – given pride of place – are a few with Prime Minister Vajpayee and the Home Minister of one-time Rath Yatra fame, L.K. Advani.

“They came here just two months back.” JP informs us.

“After taking office, then?” I am a little surprised.

“Must be,” says my uncle, and I realize for the first time that the Surya Foundation must be a group with important connections, if Vajpayee and Advani were to have come here, not merely as BJP-members, but as representatives of government.

We walk through more dorm-rooms, Ayurvedic treatment facilities (the school uses no other form of medicine). Patriotic songs set to marching band tunes are playing ceaselessly in the background. “That,” my uncle remarks discreetly after a time, “could be counterproductive. Ultimately this could encourage only a narrow kind of nationalism.” I hold fast to the assessment, setting it aside in my mind to think about later. We follow JP into a guest house. He opens a room for us to rest in and settles down himself on a bed, almost as though he is allowing himself, at last, to be tired.

“Ask questions if you want,” urges my uncle, and I do, with reference to the recent curricular reform controversy, about the importance of a secular education.

JP looks around, as if to ask of his staff what is going on. Who is this girl, and why is she asking such a question? I realize suddenly how out of place my question must seem, since we have not been formally introduced. I hasten to fill in the blanks.

“Oh,” he responds, unimpressed. Pausing, taking off gold-rimmed glasses, he says: “Secularism is just a made-up word with no meaning. People use it as they like. It means nothing.”

I wonder for a moment if he is talking about me, and feel trapped by successive waves of annoyance and panic. I don’t want to be categorized and dismissed so easily; I want to

explain, start over. But – never looking at me, JP encourages no further questions. My uncle will later suggest that he is “too close to the top” and therefore unwilling to talk to a virtual stranger. I accept the explanation as a balm for what is by now an all too familiar sense of frustration.

five nationalism

My purpose in including this description of a visit to the Surya Foundation training center is not so much to try and explain the model of patriotism propagated here on its own terms. Its appeal, far more than its inherent validity or invalidity, is what particularly interests me. Part of the problem involved in fieldwork, however, was finding a method by which to index and assess this appeal. After all, even devout Hindus are not automatically or necessarily RSS or BJP supporters, so how was I to go about identifying and exploring those moments when routine belief would translate into explicitly political affiliation? As it happened, my trip to Delhi and the Surya Foundation followed on the heels of the controversy, still evoking responses in newspapers, on curricular reform. And as the debates thickened and unfolded all around, I realized that this was the point of intersection I had been groping for, this was a moment in which everyday practices of faith became the spurs that drove the debate, put everything on the line, and forced people to take sides. I juxtapose an account of the controversy with hints of an RSS model of patriotism, then, not just because for me events happened to coincide, but also because the connections between the two are anything but coincidental.

For days before the Conference of State Education Ministers and Secretaries was convened in New Delhi (October 22-24 1998), press-rooms were abuzz with news of conspiracy. “In what is seen as a sign of the times,” reported *The Hindu*, “an RSS

“expert” on education will make a presentation at a strictly in-house conference of State Education Ministers ...”¹⁷ The “expert,” it turned out, was P.D. Chitlangia, president of an NGO called Friends of Tribals Society’ (FTS), which runs 1300 schools in the remote tribal areas of Orissa and South Bihar. Since 1990, FTS has been involved in identifying areas where there are no government-initiated educational programs, seeking to set up non-formal schools by involving NGOs and the local community in the education of its children. Teachers’ salaries range from Rs.10-15,000 per year, in contrast to government-run schools which have to pay several times that amount. Chitlangia was to make a presentation on his work in this field, but was charged with being merely an RSS mouthpiece well before the conference began. His presence at the meeting was one aspect of the brewing controversy. A second aspect had to do with a proposal that “Saraswati Vandana,” an invocation of the goddess of knowledge, be sung in school assemblies, and indeed to open the conference. But by far the most important aspect of the controversy had to do with a series of recommendations drawn up during a conference convened by Vidya Bharati a few weeks before. The BJP’s Murli Manohar Joshi, Minister for Human Resources Development, is to present Vidya Bharati’s recommendations at the Ministers’ conference in October. At issue is primarily a single line from the section on Curricular Reform: “The curriculum from the primary to the highest education should be *Indianized, nationalized, and spiritualized*. At all levels of education and in all courses ... [the] essentials of Indian culture should be introduced from 10% to 25%.”¹⁸

¹⁷ “Row over ‘expert’ views on education” in *The Hindu*, October 21 1998.

¹⁸ Quoted from “Recommendations of the National Education Conference convened by Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan” at New Delhi, August 28-30 1998; italics mine. I have a copy of the report courtesy of the Surya Foundation in New Delhi.

Critics' responses to the HRD Ministry's program for the conference reproduce, somewhat predictably, all the usual positions of opposition to ethnicist ideology and all the usual fears that accompany them. The Sangh Parivar's forays into the field of education have always perturbed critics, who charge the organizations with propagating deliberately distorted views of history, and with them, an exclusionary model of nationhood.¹⁹ So the questions most often asked around the time of the Ministers' conference follow in the same vein: What does it mean for education to be "Indianized, nationalized, and spiritualized"? Is this not a masked attempt to institutionalize Hindutva philosophy? What version, or more importantly *whose* version of history will be presented as "Indian"? What kind of (upper class/upper caste) morality will be imposed and passed off as "Indian culture"?²⁰ Readers might note, however, that these questions come with their own implied answers; that these are not so much queries or concerns as they are foregone conclusions. The interesting thing about the controversy that builds around the Ministers' conference is that here, really for the first time, a broad spectrum of writers (not all of whom are associated with the Sangh Parivar) appear ready to take on these typical critiques. Partly this is the product of an emerging trend: rejoinders by Sangh Parivar ideologues to certain standard arguments of opposition are increasingly

¹⁹ To this charge, others respond that Leftist histories are no less guilty of 'distortions' or at the very least biased presentations of fact that are themselves fuelled by specific political agendas and intellectual fashions (see for example Arun Shourie's *Eminent Historians: their technology, their line, their fraud* (New Delhi: Harper Collins 1998). Shourie is a journalist, and his writing has been attacked by historians for its particular style, but not to my knowledge for its substantive critique).

²⁰ An *Indian Express* editorial asks, in addition: "Will [this] mean the imposition of a homogenous, monolithic and majoritarian worldview on succeeding generations of Indians to the exclusion of other religious and linguistic traditions in the country? These are legitimate questions that Opposition parties and concerned educationists have repeatedly raised ..." ("Re-educating the Nation," October 23 1998).

common in media circles and in some academic spaces as well.²¹ But the issue of education, and the particularities of this debate seem to evoke a response even amongst those who might not have wanted to take sides on any other issue associated with Hindutva politics. The reasons for this are many, and inseparable from one-another. The usual disgust with political behavior, for one, probably fuelled much of the ensuing debate: from the debacle in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly the year before (when politicians ran around throwing microphones and paper balls at each other in an episode that was aired “*twenty-seven* times on the BBC,” a journalist told me, and continues still to be aired on such American programs as “The World’s Most Amazing Videos”), to the very similar Lok Sabha incident staged by members of the Rashtriya Janata Dal when the 81st Amendment (Women’s Reservation) Bill was about to be read in July, to the present loud and deliberate disruption of the Ministers’ conference – political culture seemed simply to have disintegrated. Difficult issues, it seemed, could not be usefully debated at all without the whole process giving way to utter pandemonium. Second, Rajiv Gandhi’s Italian widow Sonia’s entry into national politics, as the president of the Congress Party no less, was the source of much angst, not merely among the middle-classes. I often heard people remark wryly “if not Saraswati Vandana (prayer to Saraswati) then what –

²¹ Spaces within Indian academia have traditionally been dominated by Marxists or other ‘Left progressive’ scholars, but this is slowly changing. To some extent, this is the result of direct political interventions: one of the BJP-led government’s first moves, after taking office in March 1998, was to reconstitute the ICHR (Indian Council for Historical Research, formed in 1972 by an act of Parliament as a funding source for professional historians), including scholars whom the media described as “pro-Ramjanmabhoomi historians” and Hindutva “sympathizers” on the ICHR board (Sagarika Ghose, “‘Rational’ vs ‘National’,” in *Outlook* June 22 1998; 18). But whether by a gradual shift or political design, the nature of the academic landscape in India is changing, and with the change comes a new willingness to challenge classic Left/Marxist positions, especially on matters concerning religion and secularism.

Sonia Vandana?”²² suggesting that this was not only a tussle between political parties but something larger than politics perhaps, something with hints of resistance to another kind of imperialism. Third and most important was the issue of education itself, which seemed to tie together past, present, and future in a single moment of crisis. Here again were whiffs of opposition to imperialism, in the broad support for a curriculum that promised at least to be a deviation from the hand-me-down colonial-style models that are still very much the norm in Indian institutions. Macaulay was a natural target – for his infamous 1835 ‘Minute on Education’ and all the implications that bore – but so also was Marx.²³

On one level, at issue here were the very assumptions of Leftist academic discourse, and the use of these by political players, that pronounced regularly on what could be properly deemed ‘secular,’ or ‘communal’ and ‘fascist.’ The columnist Tavleen Singh, well known and widely appreciated for her even-handedness in dealing with political groups, would sum it up thus: “Schools all over the world teach children about their country’s music, literature, art and civilization. In India, we can’t – for fear our liberal-left intelligentsia may see it as anti-secular. It should be considered outrageous that the Vedas and the Upanishads are not already being taught in our schools. Instead, it is considered secular. Should we not be asking some questions?”²⁴ So on one level, the

²² This joke was apparently popularized by an election slogan (Assembly elections were due to be held before the end of the year) from Maharashtra, as I would later learn from a conversation with BJP Vice-President Jana Krishnamurti.

²³ I quote here Macaulay’s most well-known statement: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and color, English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (“Minute on Indian Education, 2 February 1835” in *Macaulay: Poetry and Prose* ed. G.M.Young (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1967) 729.

²⁴ Tavleen Singh, “Zero Cultural Literacy” in *India Today*, November 9 1998; 27

issue was the constitution of the ‘secular,’ or perhaps more accurately, it was about the endless contestation of ‘made-up’ meanings that spirals – and here Tavleen Singh’s suggestion echoes JP – into meaninglessness.

It might, however, be useful to move away for a time from this rather overdetermined frame of debate, and look at the controversy another way. For it seems to me that on entirely another level, the emerging counter-critique is about much more than re-defining once again what it means to be ‘secular’ in modern India. Rather, it could be said to be a challenge to Anglicized, scientific models of education that see no useful role for ‘spirituality’ or faith in public life, and that then effectively seek to *separate* spirituality from public life, without considering that the two might be mutually constituted. The counter-critique is, in large measure, about challenging just this separation as well as the rationality that produces it by developing an alternative model, in this case of education. I quote at some length from the talk Chitlangia was to have given at the Ministers’ conference, passages describing his understanding of the problem and his idea of a solution:

The objective of the foreign colonial government engaged in trade, commerce and administration was to create middle-level white collar employees, the babus or the clerks. Thus, in place of gurukuls, in the first quarter of the 19th century ... education, instead of [involving] the participation of the community at large, increasingly became the exclusive function of the State. The reach of the educational system during the colonial period, therefore, became limited ...

The same old colonial system and the attitude inherited therefrom prevails even today and, as a result, effective education remains confined to a limited few despite Article 45 of the Constitution pledging “free and compulsory education for all children until the age of 14” ...

Inordinate emphasis on a formal educational system without the involvement of the local community is [a] major reason for not achieving the required literacy levels, and therefore this approach is totally misplaced. The community being the main stakeholder in the education of its children has to play

a proactive role in ensuring that the schools run by the State perform at an optimal level.

What is the way out? The way out is to liberate the system from the hold of the western [model] and to adopt an indigenous model of education based on the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Dayananda, [Jiddu] Krishnamurthy, Gandhiji and many others who are silently evolving cost-effective indigenous models of basic education...

It is my strong conviction that for the effective spread of primary education, teachers should be inducted from the grassroots, i.e. villages. It is only then that the teaching [combines] the deep personal involvement of the Gurus with the ethos of local aspirations. The emphasis in our curriculum is contextual learning, the ability to handle real-life problems involving basic arithmetic, reading and writing, and on all-round development, giving equal priority to Yoga, sports, character-building ...

The education which does not seek to create the moral fibre of the nation in keeping with its cultural heritage is no education in the true sense of the term. Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhiji throughout their lives endeavored to make education the instrument of moral rearmament. Students need to be elevated to become more committed to the community and family, and more faithful to the values of life. The Gita, the Ramayana, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Bible and the Koran are not purely religious books, but are the storehouses of values. Let our educational system be guided by these values at all levels of education.²⁵

We might note first from these passages that, contrary to the judgements widely

circulated in the media, this is not a model of education that is based exclusively on any

single religion, even though it does appear to look to some of the major 19th century

figureheads of Hindu "revivalism" for examples and for inspiration. It is important to

recognize this at the very outset, so that it becomes possible to then discern from this

model certain elements of critique. Chitlangia's stated criticism is of colonial systems of

education, whose sole purpose, it is now widely acknowledged, was to create a 'nation of

clerks' to service the needs of Empire. The system placed the responsibility of education

in the hands of the State, and so not only made education almost irrelevant to the lives of

local communities, but also greatly reduced its accessibility. What is Chitlangia's

solution? Interestingly, he does not only speak of returning control over the process of

education to local communities, but of returning to a *gurukul* system, or a traditional

model of education that does not separate the cultural traditions of the community from the standard reading, writing, and arithmetic necessary for everyday survival.

Chitlangia's suggestion that educationists look to the thoughts of prominent social reformers, nationalists, and philosophers – each of whom either set up educational institutions or inspired others to do so, and each of whom saw a prominent role for religion and spirituality in education (and civil society) – points further to another implicit level of critique. This is not a critique of any particular religious tradition, but of the marginalization of all religious traditions in the name of secular rationality, of the very cult of the Rational that would deem faith and belief to be inherently irrational or superstitious, and therefore out of place in (and indeed harmful to) any model of scientific education. Indeed, the gurukul system challenges the cult of the Rational precisely by looking to those marginalized systems of religious belief for understandings of the Good and the Just, or what Chitlangia describes as the “values of life.”

What Chitlangia does not mention, but what is in some sense implicit in the very thrust of his argument, is that the daily lives of a large majority of Indians – from all communities – are already guided, substantially if not wholly, by the values of which he speaks. From this point of view, an educational practice that is grounded in cultural traditions is not even a radical innovation really, but an extension and enhancement of various aspects of the everyday. We might note also in this context that Chitlangia does not separate the local from the national, but instead seems to see these as counterparts to one another. He emphasizes “contextual learning” and speaks (in passages not quoted above) of an education that is responsive to the needs of local communities, that addresses everyday

²⁵ P.D. Chitlangia's talk was printed in *The Organiser* November 1 1998.

concerns and gives people the tools with which to tackle everyday dilemmas. But this contextual learning is ultimately not limited to the local, but is itself embedded in a larger, national ethos. Indeed, it is “contextual learning,” and an immersion in “local aspirations” which together seem to weave the “moral fibre of the nation.” The two realms then appear *naturally* linked on a single continuum, with the large nebulousness of the nation grounded in the small particularities of the local and the everyday.

six devotion

What does Chitlangia’s proposed model for primary education have to do with patriotism or nationalism of the kind the RSS espouses? Taken on its own, perhaps very little, although one could say that it is conceptually close to an ethnicist viewpoint or that it lends itself well to an ethnicist reading, much as General Kapur’s talk did too. In this case, however, the BJP’s HRD Ministry filled in the missing link: in recommending that curricula be “Indianized, nationalized, and spiritualized,” they went a step further than Chitlangia himself and made explicit the need for a connection between education and nationalism. In itself, this was nothing new. One possible reason the Ministers’ conference did not provoke a flurry of academic writing on the topic was simply because – aside from the fact that the conference did not proceed as planned – this move on the part of the BJP was nothing out of the ordinary. It was generally read, as I have suggested before, as another attempt by the ethnicists to institutionalize their ideology and canonize their versions of history. Several journalists and commentators did take it upon themselves to reveal the distorted nature of this history, and the Sangh Parivar’s track-record on such issues, but this too was a fairly standard move.²⁶ What was unusual

²⁶ See for example “Vidya Bharati blames bureaucracy for fracas on agenda” in *The Indian Express* October 26 1998; Asghar Ali Engineer, “Education, the BJP and Hindutva” in

this time around was a certain willingness among those who supported Joshi's plan to accept that *mistakes would be made*, but that *that* certainty was not enough to completely do away with what was otherwise a crucially important initiative.

But why was this initiative considered so important? What seemed to be at stake? To be able to address such questions, I believe it is important first to view education as not only (or even maybe primarily) the means by which to achieve higher levels of literacy, greater development or economic progress. Education represents also – as rhetoricians frequently remind us – an investment in the future. If this is a cliché, it is necessary to recognize that it is an especially important one, for it suggests that education is, far more than a statistical measure of progress, the means by which societies understand the past, perceive the present, and look to the future: it is the mechanism by which societies relate to themselves. It tells of what parents must do for their children and how children must grow, progress, live, work and become parents themselves. It organizes our childhoods and directs our lives; it forces us to ask crucial questions about our habits and our preferences, our conversation, the ways we spend our money, and what we do with our

The Hindu November 3 1998; and "Taking Hindutva to school" in *Frontline* November 15 1998 (esp. inset on pp. 34-5). Ironically for critics of this proposal – and indeed for Indians in general – is the fact that these same passages that were the subjects of so much Indian controversy had been included a few weeks earlier in a UNESCO document on education for the 21st century, produced following the "World Conference on Higher Education" held in Paris that October. Indian contributions to the document are included at two significant points, the first of which appears in the preamble and reads thus: "Higher education ... [is confronted with] formidable challenges and must proceed to the most radical change and renewal it has ever been required to undertake, *so that our society, which is currently undergoing a profound crisis of values, can transcend mere economic considerations and incorporate deeper dimensions of morality and spirituality*" (in "World Declaration for Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action (Paris 1998) 2).

spare time. It is a narrative unto itself, and our investment in it is deeply personal.²⁷ So it is perhaps natural that any significant proposal for curricular reform would provoke controversy, but then why this controversy, this time?

Here we might note that, of the various elements that provoke reaction, the one that seems most to capture the imagination of the public is that of Saraswati Vandana, the hymn to the goddess of knowledge. This becomes in fact a metonym for the larger debate on curricular reform, and beyond that, an expression of what Timothy Brennan has called (albeit in another context) the ‘national longing for form.’ “We never minded saying ‘Our Father, who art in heaven...’ in all our Christian schools,” is a refrain often repeated around this time. “so why not Saraswati Vandana?”²⁸ Another approach, this one only slightly more conciliatory, claims that the hymn has in fact nothing to do with any specific religion, but is a celebration of the spirit of Knowledge itself, and is in that sense ‘secular.’ Critics have generally responded to this stance by pointing – as in the controversy over “Vande Mataram” decades before – to the obviously Hindu iconography employed. They then further point out, with reference to caste, that

²⁷ If this paragraph describes little more than what a liberal arts education was always meant to achieve, making these lines self-evident and perhaps redundant to an North American audience, I believe such descriptions are still necessary for an Indian audience. Indian scholars often ignore the importance of the connections and points of reference I am here describing, and often dismiss public investment in this debate as essentially irrational and inherently communal/divisive. The question of education is equally a question of establishing lineage; it is not merely an intellectual enterprise that represents an end in itself. It seems to me that an analysis of this particular controversy (over most others) must begin with this important understanding.

²⁸ Christian schools and colleges, it should be said, are not always private institutions. In order to be able to participate in national educational programs (which includes having students appear for national board examinations at various levels) and provide students with recognized credentials, all schools have to work in conjunction with government bodies. Conversely, in order to be able to receive government funds, schools have to teach the syllabi

Saraswati is not merely a sectarian figure, but a Sanskritic, Brahminical sectarian figure.²⁹ How, then, can a hymn paying her homage be considered secular? Since both positions in this debate seem to emphasize the importance of ‘secularism’ while still remaining firmly opposed to one another, I would suggest that what we have here are really two competing models of the ‘secular’: one which assumes that it is necessary to be a-religious to be ‘secular,’ and the other which, quite simply, does not. While the former position assumes that the only reasonable way to resolve the issue of religion in a multi-ethnic society is to eliminate it from all public life, the latter searches for a way to achieve the opposite. Even the apparently confrontational “why not Saraswati Vandana?” – asked often by a convent-educated elite who are thought to have no particular interest in religion – does not seek to challenge the practice of school prayer itself, but questions the hypocrisy of allowing that of one faith and excluding that of another. Seen from this point of view, the secularism of Saraswati Vandana lies in the very fact that it is *not* secular: that is, in the fact that it does not attempt to separate religion from public life, but perhaps to search out the common spirit in which Knowledge can be multiply revered, and to establish the legitimacy of such reverence in public life.

For education has never been a secular (non-religious) affair in the Indian context. As children growing up in Hindu families that are not even particularly religious or well-schooled in scriptural traditions, for example, we are taught to revere books and the knowledge they each contain. We are threatened with dire consequences if we step on

prescribed by either the ICSE/ISC or the CBE, both government-run organizations. Even most private institutions, then, receive some measure of support from the Indian government.

them, and if our feet touch them accidentally, we are shown how we must first touch the book with both hands, then bring our fingers up to our eyes, as from a lit lamp, in a gesture of respect. The first page of a fresh notebook is for Saraswati to write on, we are told, and we always leave it blank for her. We say prayers to her every morning before school, and especially before tests and exams. These are our first lessons in devotion, and our regard for education will reproduce these habits of faith, will be mediated by our veneration of the goddess Saraswati, in some small measure. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that when there is a public outcry over the singing of Saraswati Vandana in school assemblies, two questions will be asked. The first is well-known already: “why not Saraswati Vandana?” The second is not often articulated, but embedded nonetheless in the first, its presence marked by the implication that addresses the problem of public devotion to begin with: it asks simply, “why not?”

“The difference of opinion between the two sides [of the debate on Saraswati Vandana],” writes the historian Sumathi Ramaswamy, “points not just to the complicated status of deities and extraordinary beings in India’s modernity, but also to the problematic role of religiosity in its public life and culture.”³⁰ Such ‘complications’ and ‘problems’ as Ramaswamy writes of, however, if we are to follow the reasoning of a Girilal Sharma or a Jai Prakash Agarwal, are academic and political, even “made-up.” To say this another way, they are the products of specific definitions of secular modernity, of rationality, of modern civil society. The role of religiosity in public life becomes ‘problematic’ only when public life seeks to *exclude* it, and to become a sphere unto itself, untouched and

²⁹ See, for example, Sumathi Ramaswamy’s commentary on the subject: “The politics of prayer” in *Frontline* January 15 1999; 92-3.

³⁰ Ramaswamy 1999:92.

unmoved as it were by the proclivities of faith. Then and only then do expressions of faith and belief become interruptions, intrusions and impediments in the path of progress. Then and only then does it become necessary to point out the “*tenacious visibility of religiosity* in general and of Hinduism in particular in public expressions of colonial and postcolonial modernity.”³¹ The use of the word “tenacious” here suggests something stubborn, almost unrelenting in its pervasiveness and its visibility, certainly misplaced in the context of liberal modernity. Such perspectives preclude any consideration of this visibility as the normal, legitimate, and in fact routine expression of faith, nor of course do they allow us to consider that it might be secular-rational-modernity and not religiosity that is the source of fundamental complication.

**seven
love**

I have thus far tried to argue that support for the singing of Saraswati Vandana can and indeed should be read as an extension of the practices of faith in daily life. In order to emphasize, however, that the ‘everyday’ is not itself an untouched realm or pristine source of religious practice, I would like to focus here on another trajectory that feeds into the normal and the routine, and from which also the HRD Ministry’s move draws meaning. The present controversy over Saraswati Vandana fits also within a long and diverse tradition of worshipping Devi in her various forms as mother, goddess, queen, maiden and warrior, which forks around the end of the 19th century to become also a tradition of worshipping the land itself as mother and as goddess. That history is perhaps indistinguishable from the story of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s “Vande Mataram” and its emergence as the singular prayer of the Swadeshi movement, but would be by itself

³¹ Ramaswamy 1999:93 (italics added).

the subject for entirely another project. For now, I want only to note two things. First, Bankim Chandra's song plays a crucial role in infusing patriotism with religious feeling – in establishing the “religion of patriotism” – and in the process giving the Swadeshi movement its rallying point, and its immortal cry in the words *Vande Mataram*!: Mother, I bow to thee! Second, this song and the sentiment it expresses is in some sense a *continuation* of Indian traditions of Devi-worship, seeing the land as a quintessential mother figure, since both are providers of a most essential physical and cultural nurturance. I emphasize this second point since it is often assumed that the deification of nationhood is a purposeful manipulation of local traditions, and as such represents a marked deviation from them in service of some generally undesirable (political) end. But while it is perhaps true that the deification of a specific entity called India was, from the late 19th century on, a deviation from past practice, it was only a deviation insofar as it extended certain already well-established local practices into a much larger national one. “Vande Mataram” could not have had such powerful emotive force in the context of the Swadeshi movement if this were not already the case.

It bears mentioning, however, that Bankim Chandra's hymn to the motherland does not have the same meaning in contemporary contexts as it did several decades ago. This is not to say that it has less meaning after the end of the nationalist struggle, in postcolonial modernity, but that it expresses a different set of concerns, with a different kind of intensity. And it is because of this difference in meaning that it can usefully be compared to the current controversy over Saraswati Vandana, since the ‘problem’ in both cases is essentially the same: instead of the question “why not Saraswati Vandana?” one might just as easily ask “why not Vande Mataram?” or vice versa. Media debates around the

time of the Ministers' conference focussed at length on this comparison too, but were mostly concerned with determining once again – as though it were at all possible, given the terms of the discourse – whether either of these songs were in fact, 'secular' in the sense of being a-religious. And being so preoccupied, their historical interest did not extend to a time when "Vande Mataram" legitimately spoke of an idea around which Indian nationalism turned, nor to the conflicted moments of transition when the hymn became a matter for 'secular' critique. Once again, that story is better left for another time, but the political handling of the matter then set the stage for the persistent reappearance of several similar controversies, including the present one, and is perhaps instructive to look to here for that reason.

Chanting the words "Vande Mataram!" or singing the verses was effectively a declaration of Independence in the Swadeshi movement. By itself, this act was enough to invite beatings, firings, and arrests on charges of sedition from the British colonial government. The importance of the song in capturing (or maybe expressing) the loftiest of nationalist sentiment and the spirit of ultimate sacrifice was widely acknowledged at the time: Tagore, for example, wrote once that "these are the magic words which will open the doors of ... iron safes, break through the walls of strong rooms, and confound the hearts of those who are disloyal to its call..."³² Clearly it fired the imaginations of nationalist leaders all around the country, for it was translated into several different languages and set to as many tunes, producing a total of almost thirty versions of the song. The controversy began first in 1937, when the Muslim League declared that the singing of Vande Mataram was the equivalent of an outright declaration of war on Islam. The

Congress Working Committee then began the practice of reciting a passage from the Quran and a prayer in English alongside a much shortened version of Vande Mataram.³³ Still, it was assumed that this ‘mantra of the nationalist movement’ would naturally become the national Anthem of Independent India, but it was officially rejected for a most unusual reason: it could not be sung to the tune of a marching band. Consider what Nehru had to say on the subject:

Vande Mataram is obviously and indisputably the premier national song of India, with a great historical tradition and intimately connected with our struggle for freedom. That position it is bound to retain and no other song can displace it. It represents the passion and poignancy of that struggle ... In regard to the national anthem tune, it was felt that the tune was more important than the words, and this tune should be such as to represent the Indian musical genius as well as to some extent the Western, so that it might easily be adapted to orchestra and band music, and to playing abroad. The real significance of the national anthem is perhaps more abroad than in the home country. Past experience has shown that the Janagana tune has been greatly appreciated and admired abroad ... Vande Mataram with all its very great attraction and historical background, was not easily suitable for orchestras in foreign countries ... It seemed therefore that while Vande Mataram should continue to be the national song par excellence in India, the national anthem tune should be that of Janaganamana, and the wording of Janagana be altered suitably to fit in with existing circumstances...³⁴

The song that Nehru preferred as national anthem was one written by Rabindranath Tagore, and performed first in a ceremony to welcome King George V to India in

³² *Glorious Thoughts of Tagore* ed. N.B. Sen (New Delhi: New Book Society of India 1965) 165.

³³ The “Vande Mataram” controversy was discussed at the Congress Working Committee meeting on October 26 1937. The report of the committee emphasized that the song was written well before Bankim Chandra’s (allegedly anti-Muslim) novel *Ananda Math*, and therefore should be considered independently, and especially for its relevance to the nationalist struggle. The report also mentions that the reference in the song to the participants of the freedom struggle (“thirty crores”) clearly refers to the entire population and not just Hindus. Further, it clarifies that Bankim Chandra’s original figure of “seven crores” refers to the province of Bengal, again without any religious distinction. Clearly the Congress was already by this time hard-pressed to justify the “secular” nature of the song – to separate its religiosity from its nationalism as it were.

³⁴ *Glorious Thoughts of Nehru* ed. N.B. Sen (New Delhi: New Book Society of India 1964) 139.

1911.³⁵ The irony of this choice was not even that this poem had had no part to play in the Swadeshi movement, but that it had been ‘appreciated abroad’ and not – like Vande Mataram – proclaimed sovereignty; that it had been performed at official functions and *not* – like Vande Mataram – at nationalist meetings. Nehru’s Congress did not entirely ignore “Vande Mataram” but gave it second place and made it the national song instead, enforcing a weak compromise that would only serve to shelve the problem for a time.

The idea that such ‘Congress flatteries’ as this one have caused more problems than they have solved is a popular notion among the middle-classes in India today. The BJP has long accused Congress of continuing this tradition of “appeasing” the Muslim community for the sake of currying electoral favor, in instances such as this involving “Vande Mataram” and in more recent memory in the wake of the Shahbano affair. Perhaps it is true that the Sangh Parivar has exaggerated the number of times such gestures have been made, and perhaps they have too readily assumed that the demands of the Muslim leadership do in fact represent the views of the Muslim community as a whole. Be that as it may, the partial truth of Sangh Parivar claims have played a large role in creating the social and political contexts for the asking of such questions as “why not Saraswati Vandana?”

³⁵ Contrary to popular opinion, however, Janaganamana was perhaps not written in honor of King George V. Tagore was indeed asked by the National Congress to write a song for the occasion of the King’s visit. ‘Here is a poem which I have written,’ he is said to have remarked, somewhat cynically. ‘It is addressed to God, but give it to the Congress people. It will please them. They will think it is addressed to the King.’ (This story was apparently told to W.B. Yeats by one of Tagore’s disciples, strictly off the record. It was repeated in *The Indian Express*, June 3 1968).

**eight
passion**

The purpose of this argument has been to suggest that love for the Motherland and devotion to her cause are ideas borrowed from local tradition, but thrown and molded as on a potter's wheel into specific form by the historical forces of the time: in the case of Vande Mataram, imperialism spurred the development of nationalist passion, and in that of Saraswati Vandana, a history of political hypocrisy coupled with the (uneven) desacralization of public life tinged this love with anxiety and discontent. 'Traditional' love is not only the product of local custom or religious practice, then, but is equally an emotion mediated and mobilized by the angers, frustrations, trends, desires and yearnings of the time.

But not all of these discontents and desires, it should be said, are guided by ethnicist imaginaries. Indeed, the fact that countless other social movements draw on the idea of 'land as mother,' deriving the force of their claims from the power of this metaphor, itself speaks to the working of a continuum of meanings, within which the ethnicist and the non-ethnicist, the 'sacred' and the 'secular' are organically linked. For example, activists involved with the Chipko movement of the Uttarakhand region of Northern India have long noted that tribal communities worship the forests in which they live as "Aranyani" (Goddess of the Forest). "The forest as the highest expression of the earth's fertility and productivity," writes Vandana Shiva, herself a Chipko activist, "is symbolized ...as Earth Mother, as *Vana Durga* or the Tree Goddess. In Bengal she is associated with the *asvathha* (*Trophis aspera*), and with the *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) ... In Comilla she is

Bamani, in Assam she is Rupeswari.”³⁶ The idea of the forest as Mother becomes here a metaphor for ecological struggle itself, and as such also a powerful statement of what the agitation is really all about: not merely subsistence, but a most essential and intimate *relationship* that defines a way of life. Telangana’s famous bank employee-turned revolutionary poet, Gaddar, speaks of paying obeisance to “Adavi thalli” (Forest Mother) in song that is at once a description of the beauty of the land, and a kind of declaration of tribal pride rooted in the landscape, its traditions, and its history. And even the Dalitbahujan theorist Kancha Ilaiah tells of other Telangana goddesses in his effort to fashion a distinctive Dalit identity: Pochamma, to whom villagers speak of their lives: “Mother, we have seeded the fields, now you must ensure that the crop grows well, one of our children is sick and it is your bounden duty to cure her...”; Kattamaisamma, the goddess of water, and Polimeramma, the tutelary goddess of village life.³⁷

In such examples as these, the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ are a seamless continuum, expressing at once angst, need, desire, defiance; moulding love according to the present needs of socio-political struggle, whether this is ecological (as with the Chipko Andolan) or ethnicist (as with the Dalit movement). I would even venture to add that sacred and

³⁶ Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: women, ecology, and development* (London: Zed Books) 1989:56.

³⁷ Ilaiah 1996:91, see also pp. 90-7 for fuller descriptions of these goddesses and their functions in village life. On only a slightly different note, another beloved revolutionary poet of Andhra Pradesh, Srirangam Srinivasarao (more popularly known just as Sri Sri), compares the figure of the revolutionary (peasant) variously to Narasimha and Rama, Arjuna and Bhagat Singh: the first two are avatars of Vishnu, come to see to the transition to a new Age; Arjuna is the famed warrior of the *Mahabharata*; and Bhagat Singh a revolutionary hanged by the British in 1932. In this poem called “Final Journey: First Victory,” Sri Sri too sets up a continuum of the mythological and the historical, the ancient and the modern, the sacred and the secular, tracing the lineage of the modern Andhra revolutionary to such figures as Rama and Bhagat Singh, and mobilizing modern “gallant warriors” as it were in their names

secular do not separate naturally in the Indian context, that the separation is produced when the imposed order of such insular categories as 'religion' and 'politics,' 'public' and 'private' make these matters too unwieldy and too messy to handle. A classic example of this is the case of Tamizhthai ('Mother Tamil'), the icon of Tamil language and culture. Popularized by P. Sundaram Pillai's poem "Tamizhthai vazhttu" ("Praise of Mother Tamil") in 1891, Tamizhthai has been the subject of hundreds of other poems since "in which she is represented variously as Ultimate Being; as a victorious queen who rules over the fine Tamil land; as a compassionate but endangered mother who needs the love and support of her wayward children; and even as a beloved who evokes passion and desire in her ardent devotee."³⁸ Further still, the State's many co-mingling cultural movements – ranging from "upholding the parity of Sanskritic and Tamil (scriptural) traditions to the fashioning of an alternative religiosity centered on Tamil Saivism (vehemently seen as not Hinduism) to a total rejection of religion in the name of atheistic materialism"³⁹ – have each appropriated Tamizhthai and molded her according to the needs of the time and struggle. The result of these diverse appropriations has been to cast Tamizhthai as almost an incarnation of Saraswati on the one hand, and as a secular Mother of the Tamil people on the other, with several other transmutations in between. Predictably though, when the DMK (*Dravida Munetra Kazhagam*) government,

(the poem is reprinted in Sumanta Banerjee ed., *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry* (Calcutta: Thema 1987) 80).

³⁸ Ramaswamy 1999:92. For a more detailed analysis of each of these figures, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language devotion in Tamil India 1987-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1997; especially pp. 79-126.

³⁹ Ramaswamy 1999:92. The last of these is commonly known as the 'Self-Respect movement,' and was headed by E.V. Ramasamy (respectfully called 'Periyar') who espoused atheism as a means of escape from the 'mystification' of religion and promoted the particular rationalism of such thinkers as Lennin, Voltaire and Ingersoll.



Figure 8: A contemporary depiction of the Goddess Saraswati, based on the 19th century painting by Raja Ravi Varma.



Figure 9: 1941 poster of Tamizhthai or Mother Tamil (reproduced in Ramaswamy 1997). The more 'secular' depictions vary only slightly, in that they show Tamizhthai with just the palm-leaf manuscript in her left hand.

with its own history of iconoclastic antagonism to Brahminical/scriptural Hinduism, in 1970 made Pillai's poem the State song, it erased from the verses any explicit reference to Hindu deities or the divinization of Tamil. But interestingly, the DMK continued to refer explicitly to the hymn as a "prayer song" and Tamizhthai as the "Goddess of Tamil."⁴⁰ Ramaswamy reads this as evidence of an inherent "ambivalence," but the idea of contradiction underneath this interpretation is surely produced by a prior notion that the sacred *should* be separated from the secular, or that the sacred is 'by nature' a thing apart from the secular. I would venture that the very idea of a *secular* Mother-figure is a contradiction in terms in the Indian context, for Mother as symbol and as icon is always-already sacred, the object of devotion and adoration for everything she inherently represents. To my mind, then, the case of Tamizhthai points not to "the problematic role of religiosity in public life" which produces

"ambivalence," but to an ever-expanding continuum of meaning that refuses any easy



Figure 10: "Telugu talli" (literally, Mother Telugu): Andhra's divinised counterpart to Tamizhthai, popularized during the Andhra movement (for a united Telugu-speaking state) in the mid-1950s. The statue stands opposite the Secretariat buildings in Hyderabad.

⁴⁰ Much the same is true of poetry inspired by Periyar's atheist/rationalist ideology, for these often ironically veer towards (a secular form of) devotionism: as Paula Richman has pointed out, certain poems culminate "significantly with a request that the Tamil people join hands together in veneration of Rationalism. Thus, Rationality has become the functional equivalent of a deity ..." (*Extraordinary Child: Poems from a South Indian Devotional Genre* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1997) 191. See also pp. 195-204

attempts at categorization – a point which is made far more directly just in the ‘pro-Hindutva’ argument that Saraswati Vandana is, in more ways than one, fundamentally similar to “Tamizhthai vazhttu.”

**nine
devotion**

Wrote Nehru, in his Last Will and Testament:

My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have no religious sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Ganga and the Jumna rivers in Allahabad since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment also has grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of the flowing waters. The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India’s age-long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga. She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast.⁴¹

Once again, these are not the words of an ‘ethnicist.’ Far from it, in fact. And yet, what Nehru, the self-proclaimed atheist, describes is the same “romance” that General Kapur also spoke of, the same attachment, the same intense involvement in something larger than oneself. Nehru is careful here, as he was in his work and his politics, to disassociate himself from religion – any religion – and yet his attachment grows not merely from his own lifelong familiarity with the river, but from the history, myth, and tradition that the Ganga represents, and indeed from the traditional love with which this river is regarded as Mother “by her people.” His is, ironically and paradoxically, a secular devotion to a ‘sacred geography’; an organic love that is, at least in the Indian context, always-already

for Richman’s translations of poems addressed to Mother Tamil, many treating Rationalism as a deity for the modern world).

religious; an "affirmation of the land, its waters, its mountains [which is] a thoroughly ... religious affirmation."⁴²

'Sacred geography,' readers might note at this juncture, is also a theme that runs predominantly through ethnicist discourse. The nationalist and Hindutva ideologue Veer Savarkar spoke of it first in 1923 in his book entitled *Hindutva*; the BJP leader L.K.Advani drew on it when he tried to forge a unity among diverse communities of Hindus through his Rath Yatra and over the issue of the Babri Masjid; and the painting on the wall of the Surya Foundation training center personifies it in the figure of Bharatmata or Mother India.⁴³ My purpose in including Nehru's comments was to suggest, however,

⁴¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, quoted in Diana Eck, "Ganga: the Goddess in Hindu sacred geography" in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Boston: Beacon) 1982:168.

⁴² Eck 1982:168. The current Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, makes a similar point about Nehru in a talk delivered on All India Radio: "Despite his modern outlook, Nehru never wanted to cut himself off from India's past ... he realized that he, like all others, was part of a long and unbroken chain [of Indian history] ... He saw that he would never break this chain as it is precious and he draws inspiration from it... So, we find that Jawaharlal Nehru was deeply committed to the old Indian tradition of spirituality" (Atal Behari Vajpayee, "Secularism: the Indian concept." Rajendra Prasad lecture 1992, organized by All India Radio, December 2-3 1992). This said, it should be noted that Nehru – despite his proclaimed atheism – did also gain much from alternately identifying himself with such Hindu traditions, and radically distancing himself from them, as and when the political need arose.

⁴³ Although the nation is most commonly deified as Mother, consider also the following description (by Atal Behari Vajpayee, who is widely admired for his oratory and poetic skills) printed on the back of a 1998 Deepavali Greeting Card I found at the BJP office in Delhi. A rough translation from the Hindi reads: "Bharat [India] is an ancient land, awakened by Independence to a new era of History, but not re-born another new nation. Bharat is not merely a piece of earth, but a living-breathing National Being. The Himalayas are its Head, Gowri-Shankar [one of the highest peaks in India] its Crown, and Kashmir the jewel set in. Punjab and Bengal are its two broad shoulders; the Vindhya mountains form its waist, with the Narmada [River] as its bejeweled belt. The ghats of the East and West are its powerful legs; Kanyakumari its ocean-washed feet ... The Sun and the Moon circle its Person, offering the ritual-prayer of their light. This is the land of Austerity, and the land of Devotion; the land of Dedication, the land of Salvation. Each rock and stone are the body of Shiva; each river and stream flow as the Ganga from His tresses. We live for the sake of this

that the idea of a ‘sacred geography’ is not, in and of itself, an ethnicist construction, but a web of emotions, ideas and attachments that structures everyday belief, and tethers ethnicist ideology. When ethnicist belief is viewed thus, as a product of the everyday, as linked intimately to the customs and practices of everyday life, it is at the very least more difficult to dismiss it as irrational, pathological, inauthentic. It is also that much more difficult to do the reverse: treat ethnicism as something ‘purely political’ or hyper-rational, that threatens the authenticities of the local and the private. For ethnicism draws on these realms too, presupposes them in fact. It draws on the devotions of the local and the particular, the reverence embedded in daily life to everything from books and food to mountains and rivers, and extends these to challenge the constitution of the ‘secular.’ What is the secular, after all, if everything has a religious/spiritual point of reference, and if all things are, in one way or another, the conduits of reverence and the objects of devotion? The ideology of *bhakti* (devotion), suggests Madeline Birdeau, “englobes” all other values in Hindu tradition, and I take this to include ethnicist belief too.⁴⁴

ten politics

I end this essay with a final point on this continuum that I have been concerned with exploring, perhaps the most predictable one: the articulations of BJP Vice-President and chief strategist Jana Krishnamurti.⁴⁵ I have thus far stayed largely away from all the usual Hindutva issues and from the milestones that track its growing popularity in an effort to describe something of ethnicism without being drawn into the tearing debates

Being; we die for the sake of this Being.” (My thanks to Sanjaya Singh for his help with this translation).

⁴⁴ Madeline Biardeau, quoted in Alf Hildebeitel, “Toward a coherent study of Hinduism” in *Religious Studies Review* 9/3 (1983) 207. More on this idea in the following chapter.

that usually surround it. I must return now not so much to the debates themselves, but to the BJP's takes on them, partly because these are the positionings that have become more-or-less standard in popular discourse, and partly because my own troubled reactions to these same issues were what had brought me to Delhi in the first place. I met Jana Krishnamurti within days of arriving in Delhi, before hearing General Kapur's talk, before the visit to the Surya foundation, and before I began to think of the controversy over the Ministers' conference as something more than the usual political disruption. So although I thought of myself as being fully prepared for this encounter, I did not have handy the conceptual tools necessary to move this conversation beyond the levels of the usual: I asked all the standard questions, and I got many of the standard answers. For example, we did not speak at all of the concept of *dharma* as it pertains to secularism, although Girilal Sharma, on the ride back from Haryana stressed it, and it came up frequently in other conversations.⁴⁶ "It is part of a woman's dharma to care well for her

⁴⁵ Jana Krishnamurti has recently (February 2000) become BJP President.

⁴⁶ "*Dharma* means literally that which one lays hold of and which holds things together, the law, the norm, the rule of nature, action and life"; "the word means 'holding' from the root *dhr*, to hold" (Sri Aurobindo [1922] 1970:22fn, 163fn). Vajpayee states, in his 1992 lecture, that dharma is "*Yenaidam dharyate Jagat*" or "That by which this world is supported." It is not, in this sense, an exclusively Hindu or even an exclusively religious construct, since all religions define such all-encompassing ethical codes in one way or another. Many Indian religions do, in fact, explicitly make use of the concept of dharma, albeit in different ways. The Buddhist equivalent (in all three major schools) is *dhamma* (the Pali word for dharma), which refers to the eightfold path; here too as in Hindu belief dhamma is the 'king of the righteous king,' the cosmic law. Buddhist art depicts the Buddha-as-teacher with his hands positioned as if turning the *dhamma cakka* (*dharma chakra pravartana*, or the 'Motion of the Eternal Wheel of Dharma': the Dharma chakra pravartana sutra was the first sermon delivered by the Buddha to five disciples in Sarnath). In Jainism, *ahimsa* (the eternal law of respect for all life) is the core of dharma. Finally, in Sikhism, the first of the *khanda* (domains of life-space) is that of *dharam*, which every Sikh male is to use the *kirpan* (sword) to defend. And yet, it is important to note that 'religion' is not the same thing as 'dharma': dharma as a concept supercedes the specific ritualisms and moralities of individual religions (dharma associated with a particular community becomes religion, adds Vajpayee (1992:12)), defining a relativist, context-bound ethic that could require the

family,” he said, predictably, when I asked why the Surya Foundation (and the RSS as a whole) insists on seeing women as the upholders of ‘tradition,’ when often that ‘tradition’ has been singularly unfriendly to them. “But,” he continued, not so predictably, “she also has her own *svadharma*, and she must discover that and live according to that also, there is no doubt.”⁴⁷ Later, my uncle would also speak of *svadharma* during his talk at Lady Shriram College, but here as the core principle behind an indigenous idea of democracy. And later still, I would read the text of a lecture given by Vajpayee in 1992, in which he differentiates between religion and dharma in an effort to describe a concept of secularism that is not opposed to religion, but at the same time not attached to any particular faith. There was an important link in this idea, then, that I missed simply because I did not know its profound relevance to this set of issues. I have included footnotes (based mainly on Vajpayee’s lecture) in an attempt to fill in some blanks, but this physical separation of text will perhaps also serve to indicate the existence and interplay of the different kinds of narratives, some better known than others, some more articulated than others, that are each part of the totality of ethnicist discourse.

rejection of a particular morality at one moment as much as it could require its espousal at the next (In this sense, even an atheist or an agnostic could be a *dharmik*, or one who lives according to his/her particular dharma). Then there are many different ‘kinds’ of dharma: “*asramadharma* (the conduct that is right for one’s stage of life), *svadharma* (the conduct that is right for one’s station, jati, or class, or *svabhava*, or given nature), and *apaddharma* (conduct that is necessary in times of distress or emergency, e.g. one may even eat the flesh of dogs to save oneself from death by starvation, as sage Visvamitra did). There is not much left of an absolute or common (*sadharana*) *dharma* which the texts speak of ...” (Ramanujan 1989:48). The constitution of these various ‘categories’, would, however, always be determined in relation to one-another: *svadharma* in relation to *asramadharma*, and so on, with one category itself becoming the context by which the meaning of the other is determined.

⁴⁷ *Svadharma* can be something that each individual defines according to his/her *svabhava* or given nature, suggesting that dharma is not only or primarily a handed-down cultural ethic. Mr. Sharma’s comment is interesting for the (still traditional) role it sees for

My conversation with Jana Krishnamurti was interrupted several times by people coming and going from his office. Assembly elections in several states (including the territory of Delhi) were scheduled for the next month, and most politicians had full schedules. I was also not the only one asking questions: my uncle was present at this meeting, along with another retired Colonel. What I reproduce here is, for these reasons also, a set of rather choppily edited excerpts from his narrative.

The definition of secularism for the BJP?

In the Indian context, the word secularism does not mean what European countries have in mind. In Europe's history the Church interfered in the State administration. So naturally the reaction was that a religious institution should not interfere in the administration of the State... but this does not fit in the Indian context, because never did religion interfere in state affairs here. The King too had his own religion, but no where do you come across a King preventing people from having their own ways of worship. The very fact that in the early days Arabs in Kerala, Parsis in Gujarat, Christians from other countries landed here and got the support of the *local* people [tells you something]. If there had been a religious state, never would these religions have been allowed to come in and prosper in this country. The very fact that religions that did not sprout from the soil of this country, from the culture of this country not only survived, but grew – today they are powerful communities here – that really is the testimony that India has always been secular in that sense.

I can give you one specific example in the history of Madurai. The Pandians were ruling ... two Christian missionaries were sent by the Pope from the Vatican. One to Madurai and one to Trichy. The one sent to Madurai went about preaching Christianity; he went about saying 'where is the Yajurveda or this Veda or that, I can take you all nearer God much more quickly.' But he didn't succeed. He observed then there were people wearing the sannyasin's dress to whom even the King bowed! So he thought there is something in this dress. So he put on this ochre robe with dharmadandam [the staff that mendicants carry], going about, preaching. That also did not attract people. And so finally he approached the Pandya King and ...[tray of coffee arrives] ...the King said he has come here to preach a new religion. He should be permitted; people should be asked! Give me this example – can you quote from anywhere else in the world? The King said alright, you are saying something new. If you can take people nearer to God – if it is effective, I will also follow. So he asked some Sanskrit scholars, Vedic scholars, you join this religion. Find out. If you think there is something good there, we will ask all

individual action, even when this could be at odds with other traditions that the RSS worldview often emphasizes.

our praja to join this new faith. Seven Brahmin families got themselves converted to study Christianity. After a time they found there is nothing new in this. They came and reported to the King that these are all already there. They reconverted. And the Christian Bishop wrote seven letters to the Vatican complaining about this Noble because this fellow came to convert and he himself has been [adopting the tactics] of a Hindu sannyasi!

To that extent our Kings have gone. They have given space. They have built mosques, they have built Churches. Would all these Christian churches have come up but for the financial support of the Hindus here? ...I quote all these things because India has always been secular. *Not* in the sense in which the word is used in the West.

...

Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva ... these are all various aspects of the *same* thing. And then we have not stopped with that. Everyday during Sandhya Vandanam⁴⁸ we say ... *"Aakaashaat patitam toyam saagaram prati gachchati; Sarva deva namaskaaraha Keshavam prati gachchati."* Everyday we say this, and what does it mean? We say that even as the rain that falls from the sky on the earth leads into the same ocean, every way of worship leads to the same God. That is our basic culture. And it is not theory. *It has been practiced.*⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Homage to the Dawn (Sandhya), a prayer recited by Brahmin men daily as the sun rises.

⁴⁹ Vajpayee, describing the ideas of H.V.Kamath, parliamentarian and member of India's Constituent Assembly: "He had said [during the Constituent Assembly debates] that the secular state should not support any particular religion. At the same time, he had moved an amendment demanding that citizens not be denied spiritual education on the ground that the state is secular ... a secular state does not mean that the state should be anti-religious, irreligious or Godless."

In this context, dharma is both an ethic for governance and the means by which the "true values of religion or of the spirit" can be incorporated into the public life of the nation. Vajpayee continues: "We must realize the difference between Dharma and religion. Religion is related to certain definite beliefs. As long as one shares those beliefs, he remains a member of that faith ... No sooner does one give up those beliefs than he ceases to be a member of that religion. Dharma is not entirely dependent on beliefs. A person may not have any religious faith and still be called "dharmik" ... essentially Dharma is a way of life. It is something more than just living according to certain beliefs ... [it] is neither related to a country, nor is it confined to a specific community. When dharma gets associated with a particular community, it becomes religion. It also becomes religion when it is institutionalized..."

"The Mahabharata reminds us that a Brahmin who had the arrogance of his asceticism was obliged to go to a butcher to learn Dharma ... 'Shatpath Bramhana' [the Brahmanas are exegetical texts for sacrificial ritual (900-800 B.C)] says that "Dharma is the Ruler of a Ruler; the supreme authority lies in Dharma." ... [A] king has to follow the authority of dharma ... to take a pledge that he will follow Dharma and not act in an autocratic manner ..." Vajpayee then proceeds to elaborate on the Dharma of the King, mainly through scriptural references.

What does it mean to practice this in the modern...

In the modern context also – that is what I am saying – that it should be practiced in this country. BJP has nothing against Muslims, nothing against Christians. But one thing I would like to add. There is a difference between us and our other parties. Suppose there is a Muslim kisan (agriculturalist), and Christian kisan and a Hindu kisan. But the problem of agriculture is the same, irrespective of religion. We say that first the agricultural issues must be solved. But others say no, no sir, first the Muslim issue should be taken care of, the Christian issue should be taken care of; some concession should be given to them. That we don't ...we are not for giving concessions to anybody, but we pledge ourselves to do justice to everyone. No appeasement, but justice for all. That is the BJP's basic stand.⁵⁰

Look at the example of Indonesia. That is an approach to follow. They are Muslims in Indonesia, far more in number than in India or Pakistan. And they are devout Muslims, but their national hero is Rama! ...There was a dance troupe that had come from there. I saw it myself. They had portrayed the Ramayana very excellently; this was their local variation of it. So here also in India we do not want Muslims to change their religion. Go ahead with your own way of worship. [further interruptions] The culture in Indonesia has not changed, even though the religion is different. There is no hatred for Rama. Keep your religion. You need not even worship Rama, but at least respect the sentiments of your brothers. You cannot think that 'Rama is an insult to my community' ... Most of these problems come from poor leadership. The Muslim community is being deliberately kept away from modern education by the religious mullahs. By reservations one cannot achieve anything. But education will make them doctors, lawyers, and so we will do anything it takes to institute educational programs. How proud the community is of Abdul Kalam!⁵¹ We should produce a hundred Abdul Kalams then. When we could have Farooq Abdullah [as Chief Minister of Kashmir] and Zakir Hussain as our president, several Muslim generals in our army, why not more? Educate yourself, and by competition come up. The Muslim community in this country cannot come up unless they educate themselves, release themselves from the influence of the religious leaders who want to keep them uneducated for political reasons. The more they attack the BJP the more they are isolated...

...
You mentioned Ayodhya, that it still rankles in the minds of Muslim communities. Can you talk about the Babri Masjid issue? What is its importance today?

⁵⁰ The BJP's positions on reservations are problematic, to say the least. These have been questioned several times, even by Party members, most recently (in the context of debates on the Women's reservation Bill) and eloquently by the well-known and otherwise controversial Uma Bharati, who is herself from a Backward community.

⁵¹ Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam is the director of the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO). He has, over the years, been instrumental in developing India's missile technology programs, and in using this technology for various civilian projects. He was also a member of the team that planned and designed Pokhran II, India's second round of nuclear tests in May 1998.

I am surprised at the question, coming from *you*. I can understand if some foreigner asks this question ...

No, not – maybe I should ask another way. I was reading...

[slowly, but emphatically] Why should you *read* about it? Do we not know that right from the time of Valmiki ... that Rama was born in Ayodhya? Can anybody dispute it? It is coming for centuries down. That he was born in Ayodhya is a certainty. The modern mind will say “why should we accept this?” That Valmiki might have been wrong. Well, if Valmiki living at that time could go wrong, why not *you* living thousands of years later? Why are *you* not wrong on that?

...

Rama and Krishna represent the very essence of Hinduism. Take out Rama and Krishna from the lives of people in this country, and *this nation dies*. We are not asking every mosque to be removed; only there. Then when Muslims also feel that this is their land, they are sons of this soil, they are citizens of India – why not they also agree to leave it? Why always insist that whatever is said by them should be accepted? [From the 1930s onwards there are records showing that no namaz was performed there. And according to the Quran, a structure in which prayers are no longer offered is not a mosque, it is just an old structure.] so why not accede to the request of 87% of the population instead of the demands of 10 or 15%? For once, when religious sentiments and cultural sentiments are concentrated there?

And if you ask [Hindus] whether – I will put the question to you, as a person born in this culture – whom do you prefer: Babur or Rama? ... Babur is not a God... [The destruction of the Babri Masjid] was a mishandling of the then government. It was a mis-reading of the mood of the Hindu people by other political parties. People went to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao [...] prepared to accept the verdict of the court, but insisting that at least the judgement *must be delivered* before the end of [that] November. Instead they brought in the army! In such an emotional issue, even the presence of the army will not deter people. People would rather lay down their lives – and the army said they will not interfere in this, this is a matter for the politicians to decide. And still the judgement was postponed, again for another few weeks after several months of waiting ...

[more interruptions. I then ask Jana Krishnamurti about cricket match nationalism.]

I will give you an experience. You reply to that. There was a match between India and Pakistan in Srinagar [Kashmir] some ten years ago. Srikant was the captain [of the Indian team]. He was a big hitter, and could score a good score. Then the Muslims of Srinagar threw stones at him. Manhandled him. Manhandled the Indian team – not in Pakistan, but in India. How would you respond to this? ... This is why Thackarey [of the Shiv Sena] takes the *other extreme* stand. He says that no team will be allowed here.

...

[on the question of groups within the Sangh Parivar sometimes taking similar extremist stances (the Shiv Sena is an ally of the BJP and not a member of the Parivar)]

See, the very word Sangh Parivar means it is a family. See, every [other] political party in India has come out of Congress stock, including the Communists ... BJP is the only party which did not come out of Congress stock, but from the RSS. So RSS, in its growth, has produced various organizations because that is a place where youths learned about patriotism, discipline, dedication, working together – all these things. And there is no caste differentiation in the RSS. Gandhi said so too as early as 1937. So, we have all come out of the RSS, which is just like a University ... or a Mother. A Mother has got half-a-dozen children. She brings them up. But then everyone takes to their own line! One is a lawyer, the other a doctor, one may be an agriculturalist, and the fourth may not have a job at all. Like that. Mother's duty is to see that there is no clash between the children. Otherwise she never interferes in her lawyer child's life or in her doctor child's life. Similarly here also, there are several organizations; the RSS has produced some seventy-eighty organizations. If you want to include RSS-inspired private groups, I can say there are thousands of organizations affiliated with the RSS. Where the work is dedicated to the same ideals. But those are not RSS outfits as such... So each of us has our own way of life. Our own rules and regulations. Our own agenda. RSS has not swayed from its basic idea of organizing Hindu society, regardless of caste, community, region. Then give them good training – then each one chooses a line. I can tell you as a matter of fact there are *so many, so many*, even a few lakhs, who do not want anything to do with politics. They feel their life is to be dedicated for education, social service, or who go to areas to serve the tribal people. The RSS does not compel anyone; it is up to the individual. Similarly, BMS is there – another RSS group.⁵² It is the foremost Trade Union in India today. Swadeshi Jagaran Manch is also an RSS group.⁵³ They both criticize and attack us about our policies. They have their own agendas. That is the relationship. The basis of our functioning.

If people want to think that the RSS control BJP at every stage ... Tamizh theriyumaa, ongalukku? (Do you speak Tamil?) ... [I nod] There is a saying: *Vaadathukku marundu undu, Pidivaadathukku marundu kadaiyaadu. Appidi* (Like that). [turning to my Uncle and the Colonel] This means that there is a medicine for paralysis, but none for adamancy.

We stand all together for a different ideology. A different approach for every issue. Take this case of Saraswati Vandana. *What is wrong with Saraswati Vandana?* In western countries, when a ship is launched, a wine bottle is broken. That was the system even under British rule here. After we attained freedom, slowly, slowly this has changed, even in Nehru's time. Instead of the wine bottle, we had the coconut. That is in our tradition in this country ... lighting a lamp and breaking a coconut. It is auspicious. Now

⁵² Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian workers' organisation)

⁵³ The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch is an economic thinktank oriented towards protecting local business and indigenous industry from the onslaught of multinational capital. The group has recently been much in the news for its opposition to the BJP government's support for (Congress-instituted) policies of economic liberalization.

people and especially the Communists ask why coconut? Advani once replied to this saying do you mean to say the practice of breaking wine bottles should be continued?⁵⁴ No, they say, nothing need be there. But what if there is support from the country? *People identify with the song*. Madhya Pradesh has a nice slogan for the [Assembly] elections coming up. They say [chuckling] ‘you don’t want Saraswati Vandana, you want Sonia Vandana?’

⁵⁴ Vajpayee adds: “Practices like lighting a lamp at the inauguration of State functions or breaking a coconut at the time of launching a new ship are not connected with the rituals of any religion, but are part of Indian culture and tradition. “From darkness to light” – *tamaso maam jyotir gamaya* – is the guiding spirit of man’s progress. Right from ancient times, man has challenged the force of darkness by lighting a small lamp. The lighting of the lamp at public functions is thus symbolic. Similarly, I would pose a question to those who oppose the chanting of Vedic hymns on such occasions. Could there be any objection to any mantra which exhorts [us to] walk hand-in-hand and to speak and think with a feeling of oneness?” (1992)

CONCLUSION

UNTIL AN ANT DEVOURS WHOLE THE FOURTEEN WORLDS: ETHNICISM AS *CRITIQUE*

one

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?

Or did the master's breath
wear the sacred thread?

Did the outcaste, last in line,
hold with his outgoing breath
the stick of his tribe?

What do the fools of this world know
of the snares you set,
O Ramanatha?¹

I ended the first chapter of this dissertation with the idea that modern understandings of religion (and ethnicism) should be grounded not just in specific cultural contexts, but equally in their specific conceptual frameworks. 'Kaliyuga' represents one way by which Hindu belief might conceptualize contemporary ethnicist struggles, their wrenching entanglements, their impossibly polarized assertions and counter-assertions of difference. It represents a mode of Knowing, and implies that each age (*yuga*) produces its own kind

¹ Trans. A.K.Ramanujan in *Speaking of Siva* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin 1973) 105. This is perhaps an appropriate juncture at which to acknowledge my great indebtedness (if this has not become apparent already) to the writings of A.K. Ramanujan, whose poetry I read first in Class 9 (under the tutelage of a much-adored English teacher and later Ramanujan student); whose academic prose, translations of *bhakti* and other poetry, and collections of folklore I would encounter and return to repeatedly through many years and stages of learning. Ramanujan is the only writer who, to my knowledge, has spoken (albeit in passing) of the "gifts of bhakti poets to modern India, in poetry (e.g. Tagore in Bengal, [Subramania] Bharati in Tamil; in politics (Gandhi), religion and philosophy (Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo)" (1973:39 *fn*12), tracing a cultural and ideological continuity where others have been prone to see only disjuncture and disruption. The present essay is not an attempt to consider the 'gifts' of which Ramanujan speaks, though it does presume those links, such lineages, and begins in some sense with the idea of the centrality of bhakti to modern Indian religious practice.

of politics and religion, its own afflictions, its own possibilities, and indeed its own epistemologies. I begin the final section of this thesis, then, with another such reference: “What do the fools of this world know/ of the snares you set,/ O Ramanatha?” The poet-speaker is Devara Dasimayya (‘God’s Dasimayya’), a 10th century Kannada-speaking Virasaiva saint from a weaver community.² The social problems his *vaçana* references appear in his imagining not as ‘social constructions,’ but as the “snares” set by Lord Siva himself. His is an ironic understanding of divine play (*lila*) and simultaneously a repudiation of it, but then his repudiation *is also* his devotion: Dasimayya, as even his name announces, was a legendary Siva-bhakta (devotee of Siva), and anger or discontent have always been – perhaps from his time on – among the acknowledged modalities of worship. Reading this thousand year-old poem with today’s eyes, we might say that he is speaking of gender and caste, we might use his words to re-emphasize the verity of contemporary social critique, and to advance the diverse causes of modern social movements. But the distances of time and language do not obscure the irony of description, the explicitly *devotional* frame of reference through which the meaning of the poem emerges. That other framework of understanding is still with us, carried forward by other saints and singers of bhakti traditions into the air of the present, and all but obvious to any believer. And they provide another way to regard the problem of religion, and so also ethnicism, in modern society. More on this in later sections of this paper.

² Virasaivism, Ramanujan tells us, means ‘militant or heroic Saivism,’ or Siva-worship (in contrast to Vaisnavism, or Vishnu-worship). Conflicts between Saivaites and Vaisnavites were at their peak around Dasimayya’s time: “Dasimayya’s signature, Ramanatha, ‘Lord of Rama’ [Rama being an incarnation of Vishnu], is also significantly chosen to assert Shiva’s primacy” (1973:92 *fn1*).

two
'secularism'

Also at the end of the first chapter. I suggested the question 'how does religion order the *modern* social world?' as a means of posing the problem of ethnicism *within* the context of religion. And in my delineation of aspects of ethnicist discourse. I have sought to link ethnicist beliefs with everyday beliefs. to show that there are connections between these two realms which academics tend to constitute exclusively. For the moment, however. I would like to pose this question from another perspective, since now there is yet another category to be dealt with, and that is the category of the 'secular.' My question, then, could be restated thus: how does *secularism* order the modern religious world? To avoid confusion. let me state first that by 'secular' I mean the a-religious, even the anti-religious: I will set aside for the moment the Indian conception of the term. Talal Asad has argued recently for an "anthropology of the secular," since it is secularism that generates religion and not the reverse, determining its constitution and demarcating the areas it can legitimately occupy.³ "The concept of the secular," he states, "*cannot do without the idea of religion.*"⁴ Neither, I would add, can the concept of secularism in contemporary Indian society do without the idea (or at least the idea) of ethnicism. The point is borne out in the Indian context in no small measure by the fact that the word "secular" did not appear in the Constitution at the time of its framing (1949), but was added during Indira Gandhi's infamous Emergency in 1976. That date falls tellingly at the brink of a new phase in Indian populist politics, when ethnicities came to be consolidated in the form of vote-banks that would be thought to make or break political

³ Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism" in *Nation and Religion: perspectives on Europe and Asia* ed. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999) 178-93.

⁴ Asad 1999:92 (emphasis added).

victories from that point forward. These new ethnicity-based political units in turn played no small role in producing terrorism in Punjab a mere five years later, forcing Indira Gandhi then to make other political decisions (ordering the army to enter the Golden Temple, for example) that would set the stage for her own assassination in 1984. Few in India today remember this connection between the secularism that is now enshrined in the Indian constitution and the ethnicism that erupted in Punjab, Kashmir, and then in less localized form elsewhere in the country. Most seem to think that it was a Nehruvian idea: a logical assumption, perhaps, but the truth tells another story. Those who do know of the 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976 remember it (interestingly) as a ‘statist’ gesture and an inheritance from those brief years of Mrs. Gandhi’s authoritarianism.⁵ Still others remember it as a confidence-building measure – an assessment which, in itself, confirms the connection between the introduction of the term and the immanent rise of ethnicist politics, though this link is never explicitly acknowledged.

Such slippages and confusions have served to absolve the idea of the ‘secular’ of any responsibility in paving the ground for the emergence of ethnicism, indeed by constituting religion in particular ways. But, as Asad reminds us, “the insistence on a sharp separation between the religious [or the ethnicist] and the secular goes with the paradoxical claim that the latter continually produces the former.”⁶ ‘How does secularism order the modern religious world?’ is a question, then, that seeks to emphasize the role of the secular in producing ethnicism by distinguishing and separating religion

⁵ Gautam Bhadra, speaking that the Anveshi ‘Panel on Secularism,’ Telugu University, July 12 1998.

⁶ Asad 1999:186.

from politics.⁷ It seeks to understand secularism on the one hand and religion and ethnicism on the other as an organic triumvirate, where the insistence on the separateness of these categories itself bears testimony to their fundamental connectedness.

I should stress, however, that this is not an argument about how opposites produce each other, the one relying on its Other for definition, meaning, or justification. This is an argument about how secularism marks out its terrain and establishes its own rationality by defining the essential irrationality of its Others – religion, most importantly – and circumscribing their domains. The counter-challenge comes inevitably then in the form of ethnicism, although it is never regarded as such simply because the discourses of the secular have already categorized and dismissed ethnicism too as irrational and pathological. Even when liberalism grants the validity of religion in the context of multiculturalism, it does so by reaffirming those spatial configurations already laid out by post-Enlightenment secular rationality. Religion then becomes a personal affair and a private right, but beyond these carefully circumscribed realms, and beyond the sanctioned spaces of diversity, it is always-already the ethnicist. Part of the purpose of this writing thus far has been to question these automatic characterizations, and further, to see in ethnicism a response, however incoherently or indirectly expressed, to secular rationalities of various kinds. It will be the burden of this final chapter to suggest explicitly what has been implicit throughout: that the exercise of pitting rationalities against irrationalities, authenticities against inauthenticities, is futile if only because it is endlessly self-fulfilling; that what such a discourse of oppositions obscures is the idea

⁷ Writes Asad, “My view is that according to the modern construction “religion” consists precisely of those representations and practices that should be distinguished and

that secularism, religion, and ethnicity are each rationalities unto themselves, not pitted against some other new irrationality, but drawn and bound together in fields of attraction and competition. This is not to produce a defense of cultural relativism, I should state in anticipation of the most obvious criticism (though I have no intention of demonizing relativism either), but to pose the possibility of a multiplicity of Reasons, and so suggest entirely another frame of reference for the understanding of ethnicity.

three rationalities

We might begin by noting that the idea of religion as an ordering of the world, a systematization and indeed a *rationalization* of life itself, is a principle of sociology derived in no small measure from Weber's writings on the subject. His tracing of the relationship of religion to the development of modern capitalism, and still more broadly his interest in the "connection of religions with the great contrasts of the *economic mentalities*"⁸ points not merely to the idea of religion as rationalization, but further to a *multiplicity* of qualitatively distinct rationalities. Indeed, Weber's interest in seeking out the reasons why 'rationalized society' only emerged in the West does not imply that 'rationality' as such did not exist elsewhere, but points (albeit indirectly) to the particularity of Western rationalism itself. Scholars complain, perhaps justifiably, that Weber's failure to produce a compact explanation of this central theme of his thinking has caused much confusion in analyses of his concepts of 'rationality.'⁹ For my purposes

separated from politics, and that the secular is the essential ground that enables this to be done..." (1999:183)

⁸ Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions" in *From Max Weber: essays in Sociology* ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford 1946) 292 (sic).

⁹ For instance, see Arnold Eisen, "The meanings and confusions of Weberian 'rationality'" in *British Journal of Sociology* 29/1 (1978) 71-82, and Steven Kalberg, "Max

here, however, suffice it to note first, that Weber insisted on the multiple meanings of rationality, and second, that he saw religion as productive of these varied meanings.

These points must be stressed in the Indian context if only because this central theme has not been brought to bear on Indian realities – ironically, given Weber’s extensive writing on subcontinental religions. Instead, the typical academic assessment of religion in India falls much in line with a Marxist or Enlightenment view, that would see it as essentially non-modern, an irrationality, and an impediment in the path of progress; or with a liberal view that would simply shift this irrationality into realms of the private and the idiosyncratic. Many elite Indian conceptions, derived directly from colonial-modern indictments, and therefore indirectly also from Enlightenment rationalities, very often follow predictably in tow.

There is much, however, in Indian reality that would attest to the relevance of a model derived from Weber, of competing (religious) rationalities. Even the persistent confusion over the meaning of secularism could itself provide evidence of a competing multiplicity of Reasons, were theorists to regard it as indicative of something other than ‘anomaly’ or ‘imperfection’ within Indian secular modernity. I would go as far as to say that the very idea of confusion in such a situation points to the existence of competing definitions of the secular, and competing conceptions of the role of religion in public life. It might be useful, therefore, to begin with the Indian debates, not to pretend to resolve them, but to draw from their sheer messiness another order of competing reasons.

four confusions: the problem of reform

Weber’s types of rationality: cornerstones for the analysis of rationalization processes in history” in *American Journal of Sociology* 85/5 (1980) 1145-79.

Most Indians are clearly aware of two somewhat simplified definitions of the secular: the Western one that relies on a separation of 'Church' and 'State,' and the Indian one (which tends to be associated with Gandhi), following which the State treats all religions equally. Readers might note that even this second definition does envision a certain level of separation of 'Church' from 'State': just because the State agrees to treat all religions equally does not mean the State itself has a religion. To clarify, then, this definition can be said to direct the State to maintain not so much an *equidistance* from all matters concerning religion – which in practice would amount to a complete separation – but to revere all faiths equally, and involve itself equally, as an objective authority, in matters concerning *all* religions. This said, the distinction between Western and Indian secularisms is not, by itself, the source of confusion, for one could ostensibly choose one over the other based on individual preferences and allegiances. But it is here, after this choice has been made, that the picture gets complicated, for if the former does not seem to suit Indian realities, the latter does not appear to suit *some* modern ideas of democratic functioning. First, if the State is to have no hand in religious affairs, then who is to take on the task of religious reform, and through what institutional mechanisms? Partha Chatterjee has argued that it was this very dilemma that compelled legislators in the newly-independent Indian Union to undertake the reform of religious practices, thereby 'violating' the very secularism they sought to endorse.¹⁰ Second, if the State agrees to treat all religious faiths equally, that is by granting no special rights or privileges to any particular religious community, then how will the State also function to protect the interests and culture of minorities? *How* will the State take on the problem of religious

¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "Religious minorities and the secular state: reflections on an Indian impasse" in *Public Culture* 8/1 (1995) 11-40.

reform? The question grows all the more contentious in the context of the Uniform Civil Code debates: it is assumed that a UCC is necessary to emphasize and institutionalize the equal treatment of all communities under the law, but what happens when a particular group like the Muslim community rejects such an initiative *by virtue of its minority status* and asserts the cultural right to be legally governed by the Shariat? When religion becomes a primary location of cultural difference, and religious groups assert their right to religious identity, how then does the State handle the problem of religious reform? What happens, in other words, when the uneven treatment of different religious groups seems a necessary corrective to demographic imbalances?¹¹

Predictably perhaps, the Constitution of India reflects these dilemmas far more than it provides a clear method by which to tackle them. On the one hand, it circumscribes

¹¹ I hasten to clarify that this is not an issue of introducing reservations for religious groups, but of demarcating institutional spaces within which and by which minorities can define and assert their right to cultural difference in a Hindu-majority state (in other words, developing what Weber might have called an 'ethic of responsibility'). The Indian government has not thus far conceded the necessity of implementing reservations for religious minorities – treating religious groups unevenly for the purposes of reform, in other words – though its position with respect to caste-groups has been quite the reverse. Religious groups after all, unlike lower caste groups, are not definitionally underprivileged, the State's argument might go, and any reform should be directed towards the upliftment of the lower *classes* within a given religious community (hence I believe the frequent slippage of 'caste' into 'class' in State reformist vocabulary, referenced in the discussion in Chapter 2). The argument that reservation policies should apply to religious groups too arises partly to counter the threat of 'Hindu hegemony,' and partly because some religious minorities (the Muslim community in particular) have tended largely to remain socially and economically less privileged than other groups (both Hindu and non-Hindu). In the debates on the Women's Reservation Bill, for example, supporters of further reservations for OBC or Muslim/minority women generally argued that such sub-reservations would first ensure that all the available seats did not go to upper-caste Hindu women, and second, would encourage minority groups to field women candidates. Interestingly though, theorists increasingly argue for minority reservations on the basis of caste: they suggest, in other words, that religious groups are often comprised of *castes* as opposed to *classes*, and are therefore clear candidates for caste-based programs for social reform. Minority groups too often formulate their reformist demands in terms of caste, speaking of the rights due to the *OBC Muslim*, or the

‘religion’ first by granting religious freedom (Articles 25 through 28), and second by reserving for itself the right to regulate or restrict “any economic, financial, political or other *secular* activity which may be associated with religious practice” (Article 25 (2a); emphasis added). On the other hand, this same Article 25 in the very next section (2b) also reserves for the State the right to make laws that provide for “social welfare and reform,” effectively enabling the State to identify and change those aspects of religious practice that are perceived as deterrents to a broader social well-being (for instance the opening up of Hindu temples to all classes and sections of Hindus). Further, Article 44 of the Directive Principles of State Policy – provisions “not enforceable by any court ... but nevertheless fundamental in the governance of the country” – directs the State to “endeavor to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India,” thereby explicitly requiring it to enact or oversee the reform and codification of the Personal Laws of different religious groups.

These twinning impulses enshrined in the Constitution of India are, to my mind, synonymous with the two definitions of the ‘secular’ described above. It is doubtful that the modernist legislators even saw these as incompatible aspirations, and much more likely that they cast the State in the role of religious reformer to compensate for the absence of established institutional processes of religious reform. But even more importantly, there was a broad consensus among legislators that Western secularism could never satisfactorily order Indian realities, rooted as they are in spiritual traditions. Pre-Independence nationalism had long sought to locate an essential ‘Indianness’ in these very religious and spiritual traditions, while using the outward forms and formats of

Dalit Christian, suggesting again that the unevenness of privilege can be measured *only* in

Western society to strive for an equally essential material progress.¹² The post-Independence adoption of *both* ideas of secularism needs then to be seen as a logical carrying forward of the nationalist project. So while the adoption of only the Western concept of secularism would have been both inappropriate and tantamount to mimicry, the combination of that with its Indian counterpart was not only more suited to local realities, but also a mark of distinction. As the statesman C. Rajagopalachari wrote, "if India's government is to be an institution integrated with her people's lives, if it is to be a true democracy and not a superimposed western institution staged in Indian dress, religion must have an important and recognized place in it, with impartiality and equal reverence for all the creeds and denominations prevailing in India."¹³

'Reverence' had to begin, however, with reform. Indeed, reverence had to be set entirely aside, and matters concerning religion separated from those concerning "social welfare," if the State was to operate as an objective agent of reform. And yet during the process of codifying Hindu personal law, legislators were frequently drawn into extended scriptural discussions of what did or did not constitute the *essence* of Hinduism, in order to determine which aspects could justifiably be overridden or ignored to achieve the greater good. The central problem of the post-Independence reform project can perhaps be encapsulated in a single question: where does religion end and secular society begin? The very inappropriateness of Western secular order for Indian society became the source

terms of caste, and further instituting caste as the primary category for Indian social reform.

¹² Cf. Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: the contest in India" in *American Ethnologist* 16/4 (1989) 622-33.

¹³ Quoted in Donald E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press 1963) 151.

of considerable frustration. Note, for example, what the Law Minister B.R. Ambedkar's had to say on the subject:

The religious conceptions in this country are so vast that they cover every aspect of life from birth to death. There is nothing which is not religion ... we ought to strive hereafter to limit the definition of religion in such a manner that we shall not extend it beyond beliefs and such rituals as may be connected with ceremonials which are essentially religious. It is not necessary that the sort of laws, for instance, laws relating to tenancy or laws relating to succession, should be governed by religion ... I personally do not understand why religion should be given this vast expansive jurisdiction so as to cover the whole of life and to prevent the legislature from encroaching upon that field.¹⁴

The years just after Independence saw the State enact several pieces of legislation which took on certain glaring religious matters for the secular purposes of "social welfare and reform."¹⁵ Each time, however, legislators necessarily continued to further define the content of 'religion' and circumscribe its location within Indian society, *producing* 'religion,' as it were, according to the requirements of secular social reform. In this, Partha Chatterjee argues, legislators "flagrantly violated the principle of separation," justifying their transgressions "precisely by the desire to secularize."¹⁶

But the violation of which Chatterjee speaks is not only of the Western principle of separation, but equally of the Indian model which advocates even-handedness in dealing

¹⁴ *Constituent Assembly Debates* 7: 781. Ironically for Ambedkar, even codified Hindu Law retains its religious status in modern India, in the absence of a Uniform Civil Code that effaces at least the most overt of religious differences in the realm of law.

¹⁵ Among these were, for instance, the Madras Devasasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, which prohibited the practice of dedicating young girls to temple dancing since it was by then equally a form of enforced prostitution; the Madras Temple Entry Authorization Act, which opened Hindu temples to all Hindus, without regard for class or caste; and most significantly, the Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, which involved the government in the financial administration of temple property and endowments.

¹⁶ Chatterjee 1995:21. It bears pointing out, however, that the charge of 'violation' is itself a secularist construction: to speak of violation, in other words, is to insist on the separation of the 'secular' from the 'religious' without considering how the former *produced* the latter. I use this idea here, then, less for its analytic value than its descriptive function, and will return to the idea of 'production' a little later on in this paper.

with all religious faiths. One of the most important questions asked during the period when Hindu Law was being codified has to do with why the Shariat was not also being similarly readied for the step that had to eventually follow: the institution of a UCC. “What hinders?” Nehru is said to have been asked in a parliamentary exchange documented by the *Times of India* in 1954, and the prime minister replies, more than a little cryptically, “Wisdom hinders... The honorable member is perfectly entitled to his view on the subject. If he or anybody else brings forward a Civil Code Bill, it will have my extreme sympathy. But I confess I do not think that at the present moment the time is ripe in India for me to try to push it through. I want to prepare the ground for it...”¹⁷ The matter was also the substance of a serious disagreement between Prime Minister Nehru and President Rajendra Prasad, although this was not widely known until the letters they exchanged on the subject were published in *Bhavan's Journal* shortly after Rajendra Prasad's death more than a decade later.¹⁸ Of the President's many substantive comments on the proposed Hindu Code Bill, his remark about its “discriminatory nature” is especially worth noting here:

If [the Bill's] provisions are sound and beneficial and in the general interest of the people at large, there is no reason why its operation should be confined to one community and why any other community that suffers from the same or similar objectionable and deleterious personal laws and customs should be deprived of the benefits thereof. I take it that the Bill proceeds on the assumption that interference with the personal law ... is considered not to be an interference with the freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate that religion. In that view, there is no reason why that same civil law relating to marriage, marital relation, inheritance, etc., should not govern members of all communities ...¹⁹

¹⁷ quoted in Smith 1963:290.

¹⁸ See Munshi's weekly column ‘Kulapati's Letter’ on “The Hindu Code Bill: when the President and Prime Minister differed” and again on “The Hindu Code Bill: Prime Minister's Reply and President's Rejoinder,” both printed in *Bhavan's Journal* 408 (February 25 1968) 14-9; and 409 (March 10 1968) 14-8 respectively.

¹⁹ *Bhavan's Journal* 408 1968:15-6.

Were readers to rephrase these lines in terms of the two differing concepts of secularism, we might read it as suggesting that if the State does not conform to the separation principle by involving itself in matters of religious reform, then it should at least do so evenly, undertaking the reform of all personal laws. This of course did not happen, despite Rajendra Prasad's objections, and the Hindu Marriage Act, the Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, and the Hindu Minorities and Guardianship Act were each passed by parliament between 1955 and 1956.²⁰

The purpose of this account is to indicate not merely that there are these two competing definitions of the 'secular,' then, but that *both* are violated, the former perhaps by necessity in the absence of established religious institutions with the requisite mechanisms for reform, and the latter by Nehru's political understanding of the needs of the hour. If the inevitability of the former violation makes it ignorable, the politicking apparently involved in the latter does not, and this issue of the UCC becomes, predictably, a matter to be taken up by ethnicist discourse.

five

confusions: the problem of politics

That, however, does not take place until several decades later, when Chief Justice Chandrachud's judgement in the case of Mohammed Ahmed Khan vs. Shah Bano Begum reminds the government – and that in controversial language that points to the poor treatment of Muslim women under Islamic Law – of the need for a UCC. Either because of the controversy that erupts or in spite of it, this is a reminder that comes twice more in the next decade: in the Tilhari "triple talaq" case of 1994, and the Sarla Mudgal case of

²⁰ These were the various components of the original Hindu Code Bill. It is possible that they were passed as individual bills to avoid a direct confrontation between the offices of

1995. But by this time, the potential benefits of a UCC even for women are undercut sharply by the potential threats of an enforced homogeneity under a *uniform* code; personal law has become a matter of cherished *identity*, the value of which seems often to outweigh the costs it can also carry for the women who are governed by it. By this time also the trends of electoral politics have divided parts of the country according to religious affiliation: the communal 'vote-bank' has become a distinct political unit in its own right. These two factors – which are not themselves unrelated – make it politically expedient for then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to open the long-sealed doors of the disputed Babri Masjid in order to 'placate' certain sections of Hindus on the one hand, and on the other, to draw up and pass the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill that effectively bars Muslim women from seeking recourse to any other law except the Shariat in order to 'appease' certain sections of the Muslim clergy.²¹ If this was the evenhandedness of secularism, a journalist with the *Economic Times* in Hyderabad once remarked, it certainly was in very perverted form.²²

Gestures like these have since given rise to the term 'pseudo-secular' in ethnicist discourse, to refer to policies and actions that cater randomly and often unevenly to communal demands in selfish service of individual political ends. The BJP, especially after drawing a tremendous amount of attention to the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue through L.K.Advani's 1990 Rath Yatra, and then even more after the demolition of

President and Prime Minister.

²¹ The newspaper-reading public often forgets, of course, that it was only certain sections of the Muslim leadership that demanded the Supreme Court verdict in the Shahbano case be withdrawn, and not the Muslim community as a whole. Much the same argument holds for Hindus and the opening of the Babri Masjid, although several minds were likely changed once the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign actually began.

²² Interview with B.K. Sudhakar Reddy, November 4 1997.

the mosque itself in 1992, had come to represent, for all intents and purposes, Hindu 'communalism' in political form. Their counter-charge of 'pseudo-secularism' was largely a response to this singular identification, and an effort to draw attention to the 'perverted' kind of secularism propagated by Congress over the years. By the time of the 1998 elections, it had become fairly standard to criticize the Congress and its supporters for their 'pseudo-secularism,' and for the Congress and other anti-BJP groups to retaliate with fresh charges of communalism and fascism.²³

All these epithets are by now well-worn and, as a result, also well-near meaningless.²⁴ It is necessary to reference them here, however, for two main reasons. First, readers might note that 'secularism' in these contexts is defined as equal treatment and *not* as separation. The frustrated call for separation of religion from state, or for non-interference on the part of the state in matters concerning religious communities, comes only *after* the 'equal treatment' definition fails in practice: that is, *after* it becomes clear that the State's position vis-à-vis different religious groups is determined opportunistically, and not 'objectively,' according to the wider constitutional goals of

²³ It was common also by this time for politicians to change attitudes as quickly and as often as they changed party-affiliations, railing against the 'communal BJP' on one day, and insisting that the BJP was the only 'truly secular' party on the next (cf. Avijit Pathak, "The fallacy of the secular front" in *Indian Express* January 6 1998). On a somewhat lighter note, George Fernandes – Samata Party leader, long-time socialist and now ally of the BJP (Minister of Defense in the present government) – famously remarked around the time of the 1998 polls that there are two kinds of Indians: those who are 'secular' and those who are normal.

²⁴ The *Indian Express* articles "If you support [Congress] you are secular; otherwise you are not" (S. Gurumurthy December 7 1997) and "Secular enough to be divisive" (Sultan Shahin January 5 1998) reference to some extent this increasing meaninglessness. Mazhar Hussain of COVA (Confederation of Voluntary Organizations), and NGO working in the Old City of Hyderabad, even suggested once that I abandon my project on the subject as these words had lost their value through over-use (Interview, November 13 1997).

“social welfare and reform.”²⁵ Although women’s groups, for example, admit that women are governed by deeply problematic personal laws, they also frequently insist that any move for reform will now have to come from within individual communities through the agenda of Personal Law reform, and *not* from the homogenizing, hegemonic State.²⁶ In a recent article on the subject, Partha Chatterjee has suggested further that the State leave the problem of reform up to religious communities, limiting its own interventionist urges to insist only that these communities become *internally* democratic.²⁷ Such calls

²⁵ Here my argument is quite the opposite of that presented by Chatterjee (1995). Chatterjee suggests (1) that the ‘Indian definition of secularism’ is a ‘new’ meaning, and (2) (drawing on the comments of Quentin Skinner) that such ‘new meanings’ appear *not* when “arguments that [they] should be applied to a new circumstance succeed, *but when such arguments fail*” (14; emphasis added). My thinking differs from Chatterjee’s for two related reasons. First, I do not believe the Indian definition of secularism is by any means a “new meaning”: Indian languages might only have “awkward neologisms” to describe the English ‘secularism,’ but the absence of a single Sanskrit word for the concept by itself cannot be taken as proof that the current Indian usage is then necessarily a ‘new meaning.’ Second, as I have tried to indicate above, it would be grossly inaccurate to interpret the political trends of the past fifty years or so as uniformly moving towards an ideal of secularism defined exclusively in Western terms – and *therefore* to suggest that the failure of that ideal leads to the creation of another. It seems to me that Indian efforts to become ‘secular’ (in the Western sense) have always been balanced (and troubled) by the important need to retain a place for religion within the institutions of the modern state, which is the Indian conception of secularism. As such, it seems less relevant to debate ‘which came first,’ but to explore how and at what moments the two definitions alternate in importance and emphasis.

²⁶ Interview with Kalpana Kannabiran, December 29, 1997; see also Anveshi Law Committee 1997. Most women’s groups will argue further that it is not just women from minority communities, but Hindu women too who face unfavorable laws: the post-Independence move towards codification of Hindu law did not free Hindu Law from its sexual bias (see Indira Jaising “The politics of personal laws” in *Justice for Women* ed. Indira Jaising (Mapusa, Goa: The Other India Press 1996) 1-8). But the argument that reform initiatives should come from within religious communities does not, I believe, as such apply to the advocacy of Hindu groups: this is a means of guaranteeing that reforms will first not be overwhelmingly Hindu in character, and second that they will not be driven by anti-Muslim/ethnicist sentiments. The move calling for reform from within is a protectionist gesture of sorts, then, one which preserves for minority communities the right to their own religious identity *and* the right to institute ‘authentic’ (in some sense) reforms from within (not all Indian feminists, however, share this particular stance adopted by Anveshi and Asmita (see for example the critique of Anveshi’s position paper by Amrita Chhachhi et al. 1998)).

²⁷ Chatterjee 1995.

for non-interference and a separation of functions clearly indicate that the State's involvement in religious affairs had been problematic, and that it only promised to be more so in the future. It is crucial to note also that these calls are ironically not so much a response to the camouflaged ethnicism of the Congress, but are very substantially a response to BJP ethnicism which promises only too loudly to intervene in religious affairs by instituting a UCC. Ethnicist motives are suspect – it is never entirely clear if they are pro-women or anti-Muslim, as Madhu Kishwar has put it – and besides this, the fear is that any UCC they would institute would be overwhelmingly Hindu in character. This perception of the threat of Hinduization cannot be underscored enough, for it then filters invariably into almost every reaction to BJP-led initiatives, from its forays into educational reform, to its stances on issues of reservation. Anti-Muslim or not, the argument might go, such initiatives are suspect simply because they come from a Hindu group who are definitionally communal.

This brings me then to my second point: that the increasing meaninglessness of such epithets as 'communal' and 'secular' have actually had the very profound effect of rooting 'religion' out from much public discourse, since it is deemed to be inherently 'communal.' As such, the disintegration of political discourse has achieved – if only artificially and incompletely – what even colonial discourse could not in the face of Indian nationalism: the separation of religion from public life, or the impossibility of introducing religion (any religion, but Hinduism in particular) into discussions of public affairs without controversy. Ethnicism in contemporary India, as I have tried to argue all along, needs to be seen as a challenge to this separation.

**six
translations**

For the sake of clarity in the above passages, I have arranged in linear fashion events and emergent ideas which have perhaps never developed so straightforwardly at all. I have suggested, for instance, that Hindu ethnicism once challenged the uneven application of the Indian idea of secularism, and that now it challenges the separation principle of Western secularism. The first thing that needs to be said as a corrective is that religious ethnicism is, by its very character, a challenge to the separation principle, no matter what the particular discontents of the time are. The fact that the BJP made Hindu religious identity so overtly public in its Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, while simultaneously citing Congress “appeasement” of the Muslim community as a source of discontent bears testimony to this idea. One move challenged the logic of separation that forcibly privatized religious identity, while the other complained that the equal treatment idea was being unfairly applied. Other controversial issues on the BJP’s agenda – the UCC and Article 370 granting special rights to Kashmir, for example – have voiced similar complaints about the unfair application of the equal treatment idea. But these issues have been all but set aside since the party took office first in May 1998, partly because they have become too contentious to handle properly, and partly because their value was largely the value of their critique, leveled against the then functioning Congress government. The issues that remain most unique to ethnicist discourse now concern educational/ curricular and institutional reform, each of which seek primarily to re-introduce a kind of rationality that *does* take cognizance of religious belief, and does not marginalize the kind of historiography that takes religious understandings into account.

What would be the constitutive elements of this religious belief? For one, and most obviously, that Rama was born on that very spot in Ayodhya on which the Babri Masjid later stood. This single element then implies several others: that well before Muslim invasions began in 1100AD there stood at that site a Rama temple marking the place of his birth; that a general in Babur's invading army, Mir Baqi, either at the Mughal emperor's behest or of his own accord, destroyed the temple; that Mir Baqi destroyed the temple not so much to loot it, but to assert the power and might of Islam against the religion of the kafirs²⁸; and last but not least that Rama was not merely a mythological creation, but a very real historical figure who once ruled from his seat in Ayodhya.

Of course when the site became the focus of communal confrontation, the only established institutional authority that could function as arbiter was the (of course secular) Judiciary. There were those (both Hindus and Muslims) who tried to argue that a structure that had not been the site of daily prayer for so long was scripturally not even a mosque any more, and others that suggested that a Shia structure could not function as a mosque for Sunni Muslims, but such scriptural arguments tended only to spawn further

²⁸ The idea that Islamic invaders destroyed Hindu temples without any religious motivations but only to loot them is one often suggested to counter the claims of ethnicist discourse. It was not, to my knowledge, directly posed with reference to the Ramjanmabhoomi issue, but has been associated more generally with ethnicist arguments about the historical wrongs perpetrated by Islamic rulers. While it is quite possible that the great wealth of monuments like the famed Somnath temple (in present-day Gujarat) may have been an attraction, I would think it rather difficult to separate this economic motivation from the religious motivations that also probably accompanied it. It seems to me that arguments that overly focus on economic explanations are themselves secularist arguments that are either unable or unwilling to recognize the religious nature of the rationality that *also* may have guided such actions, simply because of its unpleasantness (understood again in secularist terms). Ethnicist ideology does not discount economic rationalities as much as it focuses on their religious counterparts – a point which, again, supporters of exclusively economic theories fundamentally miss.

scriptural counter-arguments, rather than helping to resolve the conflict at hand.²⁹ In any event, the judiciary seemed reluctant – at least in this case – to delve too deeply into scriptural arguments, and the consensus seemed to be that, if the matter was to be treated ‘objectively,’ it had to be dealt with on the level of a controversial land dispute. The key issue at this juncture was not the all-important existence of Rama himself, but more immediately pertinent to the resolution of the dispute within the modernist framework of the Law, whether there had been a temple at the site of the mosque. Scholars on both sides turned then to the archaeological evidence on the matter. Not just slightly ironically, however, the inherent ambiguity of archaeological evidence only set the stage for a *secular* re-enactment of the scriptural debates, with each side producing nothing short of the *desired* interpretation.³⁰ The Supreme Court decided in the end – almost two years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and a full forty-two years after the issue first came before the courts – simply that it would *not* decide.

Writing in the face of these numerous historical arguments and counter-arguments, the historian Majid Siddiqi has argued what I believe is a crucial point in this debate: that the

²⁹ Lata Mani has pointed out that readings of the *Manusmriti* in the 19th century debate on *sati* tended to produce the desired readings for *both* British officials and Indian social reformers looking to those lawbooks for resolution (“Contentious Traditions: The debate on SATI in colonial India” in *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987) 143). The same process repeated itself with the Shahbano controversy, when the issue was that of maintenance for women, and threatened to do so again over the Babri Masjid dispute.

³⁰ See D. Mandal, *Ayodhya: Archaeology after demolition*, Tracts for the Times 5 (Hyderabad: Orient Longman 1993) for interpretations questioning the existence of the temple, and for interpretations supporting it, Konraad Elst, *Ram Janma Bhoomi vs. Babri Masjid: A study in Hindu-Muslim conflict* (New Delhi: Voice of India 1990); *History vs. Casuistry: evidence of the Ramjanmabhoomi Mandir* (New Delhi: Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) 1991); and Swapan Dasgupta et al., *The Ayodhya Reference: Supreme Court Judgement and Commentaries* (New Delhi: Voice of India 1995).

Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute was *not*, in fact, a matter of history.³¹ "The historian's truth," Siddiqi writes, "is never the social truth" and the role of historians in such matters "would be as moral and political persons, *not as historians*" (if this is a distinction that can be made at all). He then concludes that while firm intellectual stands are necessary to counter communal agendas, writers must not, at the same time, "insist upon the veracity of their own truths, mythical, religious, political or other."³² It is important to note here that Siddiqi's words apply as much to the ethnicists asserting their historical truths as it does to the academics to whom he directs his critique. This said, ethnicist efforts to account for their beliefs and their actions through the strength of archaeological evidence need to be seen in another light as well. For it seems to me that such actions are not so different from those of a traditional Indian father who, for example, tries to explain (and justify) to himself or to his school-going children his belief in, say astrology or the efficacy of certain ritual habits, by using the rationality of modern science. It would not be accurate to say that this father is *rationalizing* what would otherwise be only a set of irrational beliefs: indeed, his argument is precisely that modern science proves his beliefs are *not* irrational at all. I would say rather that his is an effort to *translate between rationalities*, the one religious and the other scientific.³³ And if it is true that scientific Reason represents the more privileged rationality of the two, then that is a function of the kind of split subjectivity wrought by an age that orders the world according to untenable and unequal binaries. As for the traditional father, then, so also for the Sangh Parivar. The fact that the Sangh wholly participated in the process of

³¹ Majid H Siddiqi, "Ramjanmabhoomi - Babri Masjid Dispute: The question of History" in *Economic and Political Weekly* January 13 1990, 97-8.

³² Siddiqi 1990:98 (my emphasis).

analyzing and presenting archaeological evidence, agreeing even to defer to the Supreme Court's decision on the matter, needs to be seen as an effort to translate between rationalities in order to emphasize the validity of religio-ethnicist beliefs *even* in the language of modern science. A gesture like Siddiqi's then lifts the entire matter from the grip of archaeology and a history grounded in the paradigms of Western science, and allows us to take the existence of the temple and indeed the existence of Rama himself as articles of faith.

The swirl of secular discourse that routinely consumes such matters of faith obviously obscures the fact that there *are* these elements of faith at the core of ethnicism. The Sangh Parivar's own participation in secular debates at the judicial level suggests further that ethnicism does not itself readily provide the tools by which to parse out these elements of faith, and so enable an alternate understanding that takes them into account. The problem begins when ethnicist ideology does not recognize the split between the secular and the religious, and is exacerbated when Hindu ethnicism in fact insists on the *compatibility* of secular rationalities with Hindu religious rationality, on the 'translatability' of the one into the other. So the Sangh Parivar can appeal to the rationality of archaeological analysis or the judicial system to settle, on the level of science and Reason, what is already a given truth on the level of faith. Indeed, the Sangh Parivar considers it *necessary* to make such appeals to scientific rationality to speak to an audience of skeptics – both without and within – who, given the compulsions of the modern rationalist world, are predisposed to doubt the verdicts of belief. With secular rationality so privileged even from an ethnicist perspective, it then becomes easy to forget

³³ A point which Ashis Nandy fundamentally misses, when he points to such moves

that it is not Western secularism that enables a compatibility with religion, but quite the other way around. *Religious* belief envisions this compatibility, and an essentially *religious* conception of secularism enables it.³⁴ The Indian definition of secularism is in some sense given by Hindu belief that accepts the plurality of faiths as but the many paths that lead differently to a singular truth: *Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* (the Truth is One though the learned speak of it in many ways) is a line from the Rig Veda often quoted to convey this central idea.³⁵ Ethnicism adopts this belief wholly, as we have seen, but with one crucial difference: it asks where the limits of this traditional acceptance lie, and takes it upon itself to assert and defend those freshly-marked boundaries.

Ethnicism is a kind of religious rationality, then, but it is also a religious rationality that – paradoxically and confusingly – sees itself as rational in secular (a-religious) terms *also*. Indeed, it *has* to see itself as rational in secular terms also to justify and legitimize its place and its role in modern liberal democracy, even though its rationality is almost always informed by religious ideas and principles. As Talal Asad has written, “when it is proposed that religion can play a positive political role in modern society, it is not intended to apply to *any* religion whatever but only to those religions that are able and willing to enter the public sphere for the purpose of rational debate with opponents who

as evidence of a ‘pathetic’ lack of cultural self-confidence (1990:83).

³⁴ Nandy (1990) advances a similar argument, though he does so with almost exclusive reference to Gandhian secularism, or ‘anti-secularism,’ as he terms it.

³⁵ The line is quoted also by Vajpayee (1992). Jana Krishnamurti makes reference to a *shloka* from the Sandhya Vandanam (quoted in Chapter 3) which conveys similar meaning, and is also often quoted to convey the Indian/religious understanding of secularism: *Aakaashaat patitam toyam saagaram prati gachhati I Sarva deva namaskaaraha Keshavam prati gachhati II* The lines translate thus: Just as all the rains from the sky flow towards the Ocean, so also the worship of all Gods leads towards Keshava (Godhead).

are to be persuaded rather than coerced. Only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal moral and political discourse are being commended.”³⁶ Hindu ethnicity asserts that it is just such a faith, and having done so in secular terms, it can then also assert the (secular) rationality of religion. Hindu ethnicity is best understood, I believe, as straddling the boundaries between these two Reasons, playing the dual roles of negotiator and translator in almost typical post-colonial/ modern fashion. It is not content to ‘compartmentalize’³⁷ these rationalities, for, the argument might go, to compartmentalize is to make room for colonization, to concede to make concessions, and ethnicity is not such a yielding faith. Ethnicity will propound the virtues of Science but reject outright the arbitrary judgements of secular-scientific rationality. It will propound the virtues of modernity, technology, materiality and progress, but reject and challenge the attendant desacralization of public life. And then it will demand that other faiths also do the same, by calling, for example, for the reform of personal law and the implementation of a UCC.³⁸

³⁶ Asad 1999:180.

³⁷ Cf. Milton B. Singer, *When a great tradition modernizes* (New York: Praeger 1972) 320ff.

³⁸ More recently, the Human Resources Development (and BJP ‘hardliner’) Minister Murli Manohar Joshi, has offered government funding to madrasas (Islamic education centers) provided they include the sciences alongside religious education in their curricula (see “Murli’s Mission” in *India Today* December 6 1999; 16-7). One of the BJP’s main criticisms of such traditional Islamic education is that it does not provide the Muslim community the kind of background necessary to ‘enter the mainstream’ – whether this means seeking professional jobs or admission to other non-religious educational institutions – but encourages a ‘ghetto mentality.’ A religious education not combined with the rationality and rigor of science, the argument seems to suggest, could actually encourage an unhealthy segregation and only contribute to further ethnicist conflict (cf. P.V. Indiresan, “Modernise Muslim education” in *The Hindu* February 26 1998).

Though it continues obviously to value such initiatives, as leader of the NDA (National Democratic Alliance, the current ruling coalition) the BJP has officially dropped the issues of the Ayodhya temple, Article 370 (special rights for Kashmir), as well as its

seven
genealogy

But if ethnicism takes on this classic liberal dilemma of how to deal with non-liberal minorities, proposing its own (sometimes problematic) solutions, this is not – and perhaps has never been – its consuming focus. Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that Hindu ethnicism has not gained considerably from drawing a contrast between, say the legal rights of Hindu women and those of Muslim women under the Shariat. My point is, however, that the consuming focus of Hindu ethnicism is not so much the resolution of the liberal dilemma, but something much larger: the nation itself. Above all else in ethnicist discourse is the deification of nationhood in the figure of Bharatmata (Mother India), and ultimate devotion to her cause. This is the icon of ethnicism, the *ishtadaivata* or deity of personal choice. And it is faith in this figure that envelops and encompasses all the other faiths of ethnicism, providing a framework even for the devotion to Rama. I touched on this idea in Chapter Three to indicate that the sacred is often inseparable from the secular in the Indian context. I return to it here as a way of further delineating the content of ethnicist belief, and the rationality that belief represents.

Also in Chapter Three, I suggested that, far from being an alien idea, the figure of Bharatmata draws on the multiple devotions to mother-goddesses that are already an intimate part of daily life. Here it is necessary to add that ‘Bharatmata’ is not just an icon of nationhood, but represents an attitude towards history. Or perhaps I should say more accurately, She is as much a product of that attitude as She is a symbol of it. When I speak of history here, however, I am not referring only to those conceptions that have come to be almost stereotypically associated with ethnicism: the versions that highlight Muslim invasions, the destruction of temples, and the ‘rape of the land’ itself. Certainly,

demand for a UCC. The move bears testimony to the character of ethnicism to re-fashion itself to “fill the political space available for its expression” (Horowitz 1975:137).

these are central ideas in the ethnicist telling of history, but my primary interest is less in evaluating the truth or falsity of such accounts, less in history as *fact*, and more in history as *genealogy*. History-as-genealogy, we might say, is the history of the self. As such, it does not distinguish between the stories told by the findings of an archaeological dig and those handed down as folklore or mythology. Indeed, it sees mythology as a reckoning of history in its own right. In strictly scientific terms, it is a history prone to inaccuracy, the potential tool of demagogues and sycophants alike, but science is not the only authority here, for its methods do not guarantee the comfort of any greater exactitude. History-as-genealogy, in any case, does not wait for science, is not predicated on the evidence of science alone. It sifts together the ancient with the modern, the 'mythological' with the 'historical,' the 'scientific' with the 'religious,' disregarding rationalist categorizations, and envisioning a cultural (and often spiritual) unity that pre-dates and pre-figures the geo-political unifications of modern times. It sees geo-politics in fact as an after-thought, a consolidation of that which always was, affirmed now by the modern structures of nationhood. It transforms "fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning," effortlessly shaping a nation that "loom[s] out of an immemorial past and ... glide[s] into a limitless future."³⁹

But if genealogical continuity thus fashioned lends itself well to nationalist/ ethnicist imaginings, its basis is not secularism. Quite the contrary, *religion* provides the all-important thread that carries the ancient into the modern; the verses of religious texts pick up where historical texts leave off; belief charts and maps the landscape. Consider, for example, the following account by the nationalist ideologue Veer Savarkar:

Yes, this Bharatbhumi [land of India], this Sindhustan, this land of ours that stretches from Sindhu to Sindhu⁴⁰ is our Punyabhumi [land of sacrifice], for it was in this land that the Founders of our faith and the Seers to whom 'Veda' the Knowledge was revealed, from Vaidik seers to Dayananda, from Jina to Mahavir, from Buddha to Nagasen, from Nanak to Govind, from Banda to Basava, from Chakradhar to Chaitanya, from Ramdas to Rammohan, our Gurus and Godmen

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso 1983) 11-2.

⁴⁰ The reference is to the Indus River (called the Sindhu in most Indian languages) to the West, and presumably the Brahmaputra (Tsang Po in Tibet) to the East.

were born and bred.⁴¹ The very dust of its paths echoes the footfalls of our ...Gurus. Sacred are its rivers, hallowed are its groves, for it was either on its moonlit ghats or under their eventide long shadows, that the deepest problems of life, of man, soul, and God, of Brahma and Maya, were debated and discussed by a Buddha or a Shankar[acharya] ... every hill and dell is a instinct with memories of a Kapil or a Vyas ... Here Bhagirath rules, there Kurukshetra lies. Here Ramachandra made his first halt of an exile, there Janaki [Sita] saw the golden deer and fondly pressed her lover to kill it. Here the divine Cowherd [Krishna] played his flute that made every heart in Gokul dance in harmony as if in a hypnotized sleep. Here is Bodhi Vriksha, here the deer park, here Mahavir [Jain] entered Nirvana. Here stood crowds of worshippers amongst whom Nanak sat and sang the Arati, 'the sun and the moon are lights in the plate of the sky'!⁴² Here Gopichand the king took on the vows of Gopichand the Yogi and with a bowl in his hand knocked on his sister's door for a handful of alms...⁴³

This passage is in some sense a counterpart to Nehru's comments in his last will and

testament (quoted at length in Chapter Three) in which he speaks of the River Ganga as

"a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever flowing, and

yet ever the same Ganga."⁴⁴ It is well-near impossible, Nehru seems to suggest, to think

of the modern River Ganges without thinking also of the place of this most sacred of

waters in Hindu belief, in ritual, in custom, in mythology: of Ganga as the playful

daughter of Himavant, whose torrential cascade from the heavens only the matted knot of

Lord Shiva's hair could catch and subdue⁴⁵, and whose source (Gangotri) in the

⁴¹ The names mentioned here are both ancient and modern: along with the Buddha and Mahavir Jain, Savarkar names Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, both well-known social reformers and founders of the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj respectively. His list also includes Gurus from several different sects or movements within Hinduism, as also from other faiths. Notably absent are references to Islam and Christianity, since these faiths, as Savarkar later argues, cannot regard India as *both* motherland and holyland.

⁴² Guru Nanak was the founder of the Sikh religion. 'Arati' refers both to a prayer song and the ritual of prayer in which a lamp on a tray is circled around the figure of the deity being worshipped. The deity in this line would not be the Earth, of course, but some larger cosmic being. "Gagan thaal ravichand deepak bane" is the original line from Guru Nanak's Arati, cited also in Savarkar's passage.

⁴³ Veer Savarkar, *Hindutva* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan [1923] 1969) 111-2.

⁴⁴ Nehru quoted in Eck 1982:168.

⁴⁵ In Hindu iconography, Ganga is thus usually shown as residing in Shiva's matted hair.

Himalayas is still today a site of Hindu pilgrimage. Savarkar speaks of the landscape in much the same way, pointing out the place where Krishna once played his flute, where the Buddha attained enlightenment (Bodhi Vriksha), where the war of the Mahabharata was fought (Kurukshetra), collapsing past and present in an instantaneous messianic moment of experience that makes the ancient familiar and the familiar ancient. Of course, almost all of what Savarkar emphasizes and Nehru echoes is already well-known to believers and interested tourists alike, is part of the lore of the land as it were. What is new perhaps is the link with a deity called Bharatmata, Mother India, or the nation. And yet it is hardly the secularity of this national figure that makes it meaningful, but its embeddedness in layer upon layer of belief. This is perhaps the reason why nationalism in the Indian context has not only been closely associated with religion, employing religious symbols or ideas to advance its causes, but why it has also frequently – causing such profound discomfort to theorists like Sumit Sarkar – *become* a religion. This is not the same thing as saying that nationalism is a kind of secular faith, but really the opposite: that faith provides the tools and the means by which to develop nationalism, and equally, I would say in the modern context, ethnicism. If the concept of the nation itself is foreign, it is made to fit the prior categories of Indian thought in which there is already the kind of cultural unity that nationalism envisions in geo-political terms.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ramanujan has suggested that a peculiar feature of Indian thought is the preference for context-sensitive formulations: no Indian text comes without a frame, rituals and music are all context-specific, even the concept of *dharma* varies according to context. In modern times, he suggest further, “Indian borrowings of Western cultural items have been converted and realigned to fit pre-existing context-sensitive needs” (1989:55). Such is the case also, I am suggesting here, with the borrowed idea of the nation. There are also, it should be noted, those ideologues of ethnicism like Golwalkar who argue that the concept of the Nation (*Rashtra*) is not by any account a foreign idea imported from the West (cf. M.S. Golwalkar, *We: our Nationhood defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan [1939] 1945) esp. pp. 56-61). Although Golwalkar’s argument is intended largely to dispel the Orientalist myth of India’s

Nationalist structures of feeling are determined, in other words, by religious structures of feeling and by a religious framework of understanding that sees the nation as but a necessary modern consolidation of a *continuous* five-thousand year-old cultural history. Perhaps we could say that the nation both pre-dates and pre-figures itself in this nationalist imagining.

Such continuities as I am indexing here would probably appear to the historian or the academician as transparent constructions. But to speak of nationalism or ethnicism as construction would be in some sense to *fictionalize* the beliefs upon which such formations are predicated by insisting on the veracity of historical/scientific truths over any others. It would be to deny the very sense of a five thousand year-old history that ethnicism builds upon, and the transcendence of a cultural or spiritual unity that science surely has not yet the tools to measure and verify. My argument quite simply is that such an approach is deeply flawed because it is based itself on a historically specific form of rationality that denies the validity of any others. Far more productive to my mind would be an approach that concedes the multiplicity of rationalities, for a start by resisting the impulse to deconstruct and historicize. The starting point then would be to understand history less as fact and more as genealogy, to focus on the continuities hidden beneath the apparent chaos of scattered events, to acknowledge that the link between past, present, and future is not given *only* by the relentless onward march of 'homogenous, empty time.' Once again, these continuities can hardly be called ethnicist creations; the fact of

essential disunity, even what he describes as a "national consciousness" is itself in the end a kind of cultural cohesion in the subcontinent that transcends the boundaries of kingdoms, rather than being defined and circumscribed by them. The concept of the *Rashtra* may indeed be as ancient as Golwalkar holds, but I am more inclined to think of it as a cultural unity that then becomes a geo-political one in more modern times.

their existence is conveyed even in the almost clichéd expression that India lives in several centuries all at once, as also in the following passage written by civil liberties activist K.Balagopal:

It is a remarkable fact about Indian society that if you embark on a serious study of its nature you are led backwards and backwards through 1857 and the East India company, through Mughal manasabdars and Afghan adventurers, through temple-building and land grants, through Manu dharmasastra, the Gita and Kautilya, through the Buddha, the Upanishads and the Vedas, to arrive out of breath at the mythical figure of the Aryan warrior with his hymns, his horse and his spokeless chariot ... In India the past has eaten into the present with a comprehensiveness that leaves you little choice.⁴⁷

That which is a frustration for Balagopal happens also to be the very substance of ethnicist belief that not only recognizes the same continuity, but sees the present as a product of it, pre-figured within it. For ethnicists, as for devout believers, the past is not a set of fragmented events united only by chance and circumstance, the coincidences of clocks and calendars. Nor is it a disjointed collection of facts and figures, so many antiques in a fashionable home, so many old and dusty volumes telling of days gone by. It is a living, breathing entity, like an old idol that a grandmother and her mother before her prayed before in a puja room somewhere, still carrying with it the faint redolences of burning oil lamps and incense. To understand the intimacy of this relationship is to enable a crucial escape from the inexorable opposition of reason to non-reason, and

⁴⁷ K. Balagopal, Review, *Economic and Political Weekly* November 30 1985. For the sake of accuracy, I should mention here that one prominent argument that tends to figure in ethnicist discourse (though not *only* in ethnicist discourse) challenges the validity of the Aryan Invasion Theory of Indian history on both linguistic and archaeological grounds, and also by questioning the motivations and allegiances of those scholars who first propagated the theory (For example, see Michel Danino and Sujata Nahar, *The Invasion that never was* (Mysore: Mira Aditi 1996); N.S. Rajaram, *The Politics of History: Aryan Invasion Theory and the Subversion of Scholarship* (New Delhi: Voice of India 1995), and Shrikant G.Talageri, *Aryan Invasion Theory and Indian nationalism* (New Delhi: Voice of India 1993)). Disputes about the content of the continuity do not, however, negate its existence: if anything, they emphasize its relevance to contemporary contexts.

therefore to set the stage for a fuller, experiential understanding of the rationality of nationalism and ethnicism.

eight religion

I have hesitated thus far to state unequivocally that ethnicism *is* religion, simply because such a formulation would seem to imply that ethnicism is not therefore a politics. The truth, anti-climactic as ever, probably lies somewhere in between, revealing by its position the arbitrariness by which such categories as 'religion' and 'politics' retain their mutually opposed distinction. And yet there is a contrast to be made, for ethnicism is not so much what happens when (secular) politics becomes a religion, but that which emerges when religion "[assumes] all the forms and functions of a politics,"⁴⁸ when religion *becomes* a politics, threatening the hegemony of the established secular order by insisting on the relevance of an older religious lineage. "Defiance is not discontinuity." Ramanujan has written, introducing his translations of Virasaiva (bhakti) poetry, "Alienation from the immediate environment can mean continuity with an older ideal. Protest can take place in the very name of one's opponents' ideals."⁴⁹ To my mind, this analysis could as well be applied to ethnicism, whose protest often does take place in the name of and in the language of secular rationality. But here arises also the difficulty of carrying forward the proposition of ethnicism as religion, for more often than not, ethnicist discourse only bears the hints of an alternative, indigenous, socio-political design that draws the continuity of the past into the present. More often than not, it is so absorbed by the task of protest, so engrossed with the necessary critique of the secular

⁴⁸ James D. Faubion, "Outline for an Anthropology of religion and violence" in *ISLA 1: Philosophical Designs* (1998) 676.

⁴⁹ Ramanujan 1973:33.

order of things, that it does not expend the time to develop into a coherent whole the hinted possibilities that in fact enable its critique. Perhaps we should say that it takes those ideas for granted, or, even more likely, that it defers to the authority of the many different gurus of India – from the Buddha and Nanak to Chaitanya and Basava, as Savarkar has said – for a fuller explication of these themes. Following from this, it would be inaccurate also to equate Hindu ethnicism with *Hinduism*, if only because Hinduism has never been just one thing, and not even the apparent popularity of Hindutva with the media as its most powerful tool will reduce it to that singularity now. I would prefer to think of religious ethnicism as one important strain of thought, action and belief within Hinduism, much as Sikhism once was, and everything from the Arya Samaj to the ISKON movement⁵⁰ and the thinking of Puttaparthi's Sai Baba continue to be. In sum, there are two potential problems with any straightforward attempt to conceptualize ethnicism as religion: first, that ethnicist discourse does not convey a clear sense of itself as a religion, fully spelling out the religious precepts on which its political ideology is based; and second, that it would be inaccurate and misleading to conflate understandings of ethnicism with understandings of Hinduism.

This said, it is also true that ethnicism is not at odds with any other strain of thought, action, or belief within Hinduism, from the Arya Samaj movement to the thinking of the Puttaparthi Sai Baba. It shares with these other 'schools', and indeed with the faiths of Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, several basic ideas and modalities of worship. This essential spiritual commonality of divergent faiths and schools, each with their origin in the geographic area of the subcontinent, is in fact what ethnicism cites as the primary

⁵⁰ International Society of Krishna Consciousness, or the Hare Krishna movement, as

basis for the cultural (and therefore political) unity of India.⁵¹ Ethnicist ideology may hold Buddhist non-violence responsible for the weakening of society that ensured the subsequent success of Muslim invasions, but it maintains nonetheless a reverence for Buddhism. Its greater ideological affinity with a movement like the Arya Samaj, for example, and its own heightened militancy do not preclude a leader like Ashok Singhal of the VHP from visiting the Ashram at Puttaparthi as a *bhakta* (devotee).⁵² In fact, to most Indians, such a gesture would appear quite normal. My point here on one level is that if ethnicist belief is one of many faiths within Hinduism, it does not at the same time substantially differ from most other belief systems that have their origins in the subcontinent. But further than this, I am also suggesting that ethnicist faith sees itself very much as an *heir* to the tradition of spirituality that other Indian faiths represent. So Savarkar, in the passage quoted above, names Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Raja Ram Mohan Roy of the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj respectively as Gurus of Indian tradition, though both are his contemporaries, and his 'equals' in some sense. Ethnicism casts itself thus in the role of devotee, paying obeisance to a tradition of spirituality and

it is more popularly known.

⁵¹ Such older ethnicist ideologues as Savarkar and Golwalkar denied Islam and Christianity a place in this commonality, arguing that these faiths (unlike Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) can never see India as *both* holyland and fatherland (an argument which, it should be mentioned, present-day ethnicism does not – *cannot* – uphold, if only for reasons of political expediency). Somewhat contradictorily, however, they also forcefully advanced the argument that all people residing East of the Sindhu River (Punjab) are Hindus, regardless of specific religious affiliations. In other words, the older thinkers transformed the category "Hindu" from a religio-cultural entity into a *geographic* one, upholding in some sense the Persian name for India, "Hindustan" or land of the Hindus. This too is an idea to which present-day ethnicists do not refer much, not so much because they reject the notion, but more I think because, in the conceptual framework of identity politics, such terminology would be considered hegemonic.

⁵² I use this example because, as it happens, I once saw him there, while visiting an older relative who now lives in the Ashram.

cultural unity, as well as to the political manifestation of this unity in the figure of Bharatmata, or Mother India.

This gesture of 'bhakti'. I would argue, characterizes ethnicist belief much as it characterizes most other aspects of Hindu religious practice. "Chronologically from the seventh century on," writes Ramanujan, "century after century, bhakti movements have arisen in different regions and languages, spanning the whole Indian sub-continent, in Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, and Punjabi, roughly in that order. Lit like a fuse, the passion of bhakti seems to spread from region to region, century to century, quickening the religious impulse."⁵³ If the diverse traditions of devotion loosely called the 'Bhakti movement' began as a vernacular protest to the prevailing Hindu 'establishment' and 'structure,' "in the course of time, the heretics [were] canonized, temples [were] erected to them, Sanskrit hagiographies [were] composed about them."⁵⁴ From this point on, as the Sanskritist Madeleine Biardeau has suggested, bhakti "englobes" all the other values of Hinduism, so much so that the practice of religion today is almost unimaginable without it.⁵⁵ Ethnicism is by no means a modern equivalent of the Bhakti movement, though it too seeks to revive a diminished connection with an older lineage. Ethnicism is perhaps better understood as both heir to and participant in a broader religious tradition still dominated by the "absolute adoration, submission, ecstasy, love, tenderness which is the Indian idea of bhakti."⁵⁶ In other

⁵³ Ramanujan 1973:40.

⁵⁴ Ramanujan 1973:36.

⁵⁵ quoted in Alf Hiltebeitel 1983:207. The word 'bhakti,' as the translator Shyama Futehally has significantly noted, is the same in all Indian languages (see her introduction to *In the Dark of the Heart: Songs of Meera* (San Francisco: Harper Collins 1994).

⁵⁶ Sri Aurobindo *The Hour of God and other writings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press 1971) 280.

words, the modalities of ethnicist belief are given in some part by the established modalities of bhakti. The fundamental relationship of citizen-subject to the nation is one and the same, in nationalist-ethnicist imagining, as that of devotee to deity: a relationship mirrored and symbolized in the various face-to-face dyadic relationships of bhakti, as “lover/beloved, father/son, mother/child, whore/customer, master/man,”⁵⁷ but privileging obviously the mother-child dynamic. In this sense, ethnicism – like so many other modern movements that draw self-consciously or otherwise, in part or in whole, from religion – is the modern child of bhakti that divinises Bharatmata and focuses its adoration on her person. In this qualified sense, ethnicism *is* religion.

And yet, ethnicism is as much ‘midnight’s child,’ or the conflicted product of post-colonial modernity destined to straddle the boundaries of divergent rationalities and the lineages those represent. Continuities do not replace or destroy one-another, though one inevitably alters the other’s course. Ethnicism responds to the pressures of modernity, both local and global, by focussing on a forgotten (not absent) vitality, a largely missing virility (for was not that the reading most observers had of the nuclear tests?). But its rationale is always implicitly a rationale of devotion, and its gestures as much a compliant response to modernity as a reply from entirely another position that sees the work of the world in some larger cosmic frame.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ramanujan 1973:35.

⁵⁸ I do not mean to imply, in this, that all ethnicists are bhaktas (devotees) or worse, that devotion is necessarily submissive. To my knowledge Hindu thought fully acknowledges that great bhaktas can just as easily be arrogant or egoistic people – indeed that one can be arrogant about one’s devotion, as brahm:ins are often said to be in folklore.

Then for an ideology of action, ethnicism looks to the concept of ‘Karmayoga,’ or Yoga (“the art of conscious self-finding”⁵⁹) through Karma (work, labor)⁶⁰; for a cosmology, and a personal, moral and political ethic, it looks to the multi-faceted, context-bound and perpetually relativist idea of Dharma (“that which one lays hold of, and which holds things together”⁶¹); for ideals of governance, it looks to the promise of Ramrajya, or the conception of perfect justice, order and discipline, of righteousness in every sense, that once was under the rule of Rama.⁶² It draws these ideas from texts as well-known as the *Bhagavad Gita* – which elaborates on bhakti, karmayoga and dharma, among other ideas – but equally from other, less frequently read, but commonly referenced texts of Law and Statecraft: the *Dharmashastras* (texts of Dharma) from which Vajpayee (1992) quotes at length; Kautilya’s justly famous 300BC treatise on all matters relating to politics and governance, the *Arthashastra* (text of ‘artha’ or economics/ politics); the *Nitishastras*

⁵⁹ Sri Aurobindo [1962] 1970:36.

⁶⁰ A concept derived from the *Bhagavad Gita*, but not without its counterparts in bhakti traditions: in “Virasaiva slogans like *kayakave kailasa* (Basavanna), ‘Work is heaven,’ ‘to work is to be in the Lord’s kingdom’” (Ramanujan 1973:35). A legend from the life of the Virasaiva saint Dasimayya (whose poem is quoted at the start of this essay) is also worth noting here: Dasimayya is said to have “performed ascetic penance in the forest when Siva appeared to him, advised him not to punish his body ... The Lord taught him that working in the world (*kayaka*) was a part of worshipping and reaching Him. Dasimayya became a weaver. So he is also known as Jedara Dasimayya, or ‘Dasimayya of the weavers’” (Ramanujan 1973:91). The idea of karma, almost synonymous with all things Hindu to outside observers, is not unrelated, but is a somewhat different idea.

⁶¹ Sri Aurobindo [1922] 1970:22. Dharma is relativist/ context-bound in at least two senses: (1) in the sense of constituting ‘righteous conduct’ according to the requirements of context, and (2) in the sense of defining one kind of dharma in relation to others (a woman’s *svadharma*, for example, would always be linked to and molded by her dharma as a wife, mother, daughter and so on).

⁶² Of course ‘Ramrajya’ was also (famously) a Gandhian goal, popularized and idealized in Indian politics by Gandhi’s own unique brand of devotion to Lord Rama. The associations of the concept remain to this day still primarily Gandhian; ethnicist focus on the idea is secondary, but not absent. All these concepts, it should be said, would be familiar to most Indians, who very likely use such concepts with reference to their own daily lives. Gandhi in fact probably owes much of his success with ideas like that of Ramrajya to the fact that such concepts and vocabularies were far from esoteric.

(texts of 'wise conduct,' loosely translated), of which the *Panchatantra* is a prime example, promising to deliver the essence of *niti* through five books of compactly organized stories that retain to this day their relevance and popularity.⁶³ And then of course there are the many versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, veritable mines of stories dealing with several ranges of ideas central to Indian/Hindu thought.

It is neither my place nor my purpose, however, to elaborate further on these themes, in no small measure because other writers far more qualified than I have already undertaken such tasks several times before: in this I defer, like the ethnicists perhaps, to the greater authority of a long line of ancient and modern Gurus. No less important, however, is the fact that my primary concern is with establishing the links of ethnicism with religion, not with the description or interpretation of religion itself. My purpose has been all along perhaps no more than to challenge the discomfort each modern academic is prone to feel when religion exceeds its allotted space in the secular order, to question the basis of the impulse to fear that ethnicism seems always to provoke, to challenge the idea that such an apparently uncontrolled overflowing can produce only newer and still newer expressions of fundamentalism. My purpose has been to subvert the logic of secular liberalism that authenticates the practice of faith in some realms and not in others, privileging the private and the individual over the public and the collective, and to suggest that *this* is in fact the critique of ethnicism itself.

⁶³ The Buddhist counterpart to the *Panchatantra* stories are the Jataka Tales, which trace out the life of the Buddha and are commonly depicted in Buddhist art. These tales too are equally well-known, to children and adults alike. The influences of these story-telling traditions are said to be evident in still other story-systems: the tales of the Arabian Nights, for example.

The ethnicist worldview is in no small measure a religious worldview, but unlike traditional Hinduism, which allows for the kind of ‘compartmentalization’ of practices and rationalities about which Milton Singer has spoken⁶⁴, ethnicism resists outright the confinements of secular categorization and looks to spirituality for a larger logic of operation. Ethnicism is a public faith, we might say, a religion of and for the modern world, sometimes belligerent, sometimes violent, speaking in tongues that secular rationalities can never truly understand and which ethnicism, caught between rationalities, can never fully explain. What is *bhakti* and how could it define a politics? What might an allegiance to Dharma entail? How would Ramrajya manifest in the modern world, amidst the institutions of modernity?⁶⁵ Ethnicism does not, I believe, have all the answers. It does insist that these are the concepts and categories that should properly structure Indian modernity: it does argue that indigenous models of politics and statecraft should be both the inspiration *and* the foundation of modern Indian democracy, first because they are better suited to Indian realities and second because they *are* Indian.⁶⁶ But beyond this surety, ethnicism has only (as do most other believers) a partial sense of how to translate the ancient into the modern, based on the available definitions of the concepts in question. These definitions, however, are themselves sometimes confused and obscure, inevitably the interpretations of modern thought, often

⁶⁴ Cf. Milton B. Singer 1972:320ff.

⁶⁵ Some part of an answer to this question is contained in Vajpayee’s (1992) lecture, excerpts from which were included in the footnotes of Chapter 3.

⁶⁶ The work of Constitution-building, for example, was already seen in this light: words superscribed over the seal of the Constituent Assembly read “Dharma Chakra Pravartanaya” (turning the wheel of dharma, or the cosmic law of righteousness). Other – the Asoka chakra, for example, standing among other things for peace and religious tolerance (of the kind Asoka exemplified) – are already part of government insignia. And yet, ethnicists would argue I think, the meaning of these words and symbols should do more than

the products of Orientalist scholarship.⁶⁷ Some of these (drawn from ethnicist discourse or other sources, which have been particularly meaningful to me) have already been worked into the text of this and the previous chapter. Here I would like only to add that ethnicist faith does not view such ideas as dharma or Ramrajya as specifically religious, that is as essentially incompatible with ideologies other than those defined by Hindu belief. On the contrary, it argues that every religion frames a Dharma⁶⁸, that every faith has shades of devotion that correspond, in some measure, to the adoration implicit in bhakti, and certain incontrovertible conceptions of order that offer valuable alternatives to modern secular society. So P.D.Chitlangia of the Friends of Tribal Society (FTS), invited to speak at the Education Ministers' Conference in the fall of 1998 points out that "The Gita, the Ramayana, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Bible and the Koran are not purely religious books, but are the storehouses of values," and exhorts that "our educational system be guided by these values at all levels."⁶⁹ The figure of Bharatmata is not meant

symbolically reference the existence of an ancient tradition: they should influence and define modern models of politics and governance.

⁶⁷ Further, ethnicist discourse does not commonly use this conceptual vocabulary to deal explicitly with modern dilemmas. For example, Indians often debate the proper role of a policeman (who is also a Hindu or a Muslim) in the context of a riot. Secularists would argue that the *secular* duty of being a policeman should supercede any other: others sometimes find it justifiable for such a person to himself participate in the riot, since he too is a believer. The idea of dharma – which otherwise features quite prominently in ethnicist discourse – would actually lift this issue from the grip of the secular/ communal binary, but is conspicuously absent in such mundane contexts. In other words, introducing the higher ethic of dharma would release the policeman from having to make an 'either/or' decision, of *either* betraying a faith *or* failing a professional responsibility, and make his a decision about acting according to his dharma. Such ideas are rarely put forth in conversations to resolve such common dilemmas, though they continue to represent – as in Vajpayee's talk – ideals of personal and collective functioning.

⁶⁸ Though religion is not the conceptual equivalent of dharma, as explained in Chapter 3 (*fn45*).

⁶⁹ Chitlangia's 1998:7. On another note: the comments quoted here appear not at the start of his speech, but tellingly at the very end, the *conclusion* of an argument rather than an acceptable starting point. It would appear from this that the process of working up to such a

to replace or supercede all other icons of faith, be these religious or otherwise, though ethnicism does demand – sometimes vociferously, sometimes menacingly, or even just incessantly – that She come first.

But if religious ethnicism believes in the secularity of such ideas as Ramrajya or such figures as Saraswati and Bharatmata, the larger culture of ethnicism – in which it too participates – does not. The secular discourses of identity, diversity, multiculturalism, each focussed in one way or another on the consolidation and assertion of some essential sense of difference, mark and tag these ideas too as essentially and therefore *exclusively* Hindu. Secularism constitutes religion once again, as irretrievably benign *or* as irrepressibly assertive, but either way as desacralized *difference*. It negates and resists the transformative potential of religious ideas in any other realm except the sanctioned private: it insists, often as vociferously as ethnicism, that that private religious identity be monitored and kept well within pre-laid boundary-lines. And so the cycle re-generates itself: religious ethnicism, in response, occasionally bewildered but mostly angered, continues its work at the center of this impasse.

conclusion is the first and most important step of ethnicist critique. The question of *how* the Gita, the Bible and the Guru Granth Sahib are to be mined for the values they contain is something that can be dealt with only if this logic is first accepted within the reigning secular order. Perhaps we could say in this sense that the primary purpose of ethnicism is not so much the formulation of an alternative order, but *critique*.

nine
metaphors

There are stories in Indian folklore that tell of sadhus and fakirs who, happening to witness certain rather routine events of daily life – domestic scenes, business transactions – laugh, and then prepare to go on their ways. Often a character from the story who has noticed the sadhu's laughter will pursue him and demand to know the reason, upon which the sadhu reveals the cause for his mysterious amusement: that the banker who is so intent on collecting his dues from a poor client is due to die that evening; that the young child that torments its mother was the sister-in-law that the mother had harried in a previous birth; that the goat a man is taking to be slaughtered is the father who sought the protection of his son.⁷⁰ When it is possible, as in stories when a death is imminent, the sadhus will suggest a remedy. But these are invariably designed to placate the Gods who see to the order of the world, to make them relent or to provoke their embarrassment so that they yield a little; remedies are never designed to make the businessman change his character or the mother alter her habits. Such decisions are left to the people involved, and until then, the businessman must continue to be a businessman, and the goat will continue to be a goat.

Such an itinerant sadhu, watching this scene I have been describing in the course of this work, might also laugh at all its entangled perplexities, at all its 'passionate contraries,' because he sees them as none of us are able to, as *lila* or Divine sport. The sadhu's laughter is not cynical; he does not, as a human observer might, lament, saying 'look what these people have made of the world given to them,' or suggest ways to circumvent

that which is. Instead, he perhaps sees a Divine purpose even in the worst turmoil; he sees the *necessity* of this turmoil for the creation of another harmony; he recognizes its instrumentality as it were. This is Kaliyuga, he might say, again without cynicism but with the amusement that comes from recognizing the all-too familiar, in a word summing up the state of worldly affairs, in a word describing the proclivities and particularities of the Age, its specific capacities as well as its specific limitations.

Answering the aloof pronouncements of the sadhu is the cry of the bhakta, not outside the world able to look in, but embedded in its daily strife:

The rich
will make temples for Siva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

Basavanna asks, and makes his body a temple instead: "My legs are pillars./ the body the shrine./ the head a cupola/ of gold. /Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers./ things standing shall fall, /but the moving ever shall stay."⁷¹ Bhakti poetry, embedded in the entrenched hierarchies and ritualism of the age, sought the transcendence of a direct relationship with God that reduced to naught the "snares" of the world. To the saints of the Bhakti tradition, as for most modern believers, religion was never a "spectator sport, a reception, a consumption" but "an experience of *Now*, a way of being."⁷²

This is all, in some sense, I have tried to say about ethnicism. That it encapsulates an experience of Now, and exemplifies a way of Being. That it is not a perversion, a

⁷⁰ Three versions of this story are re-told in Kirin Narayan's *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu religious teaching* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1992) pp. 161-7; 176-9.

⁷¹ Basavanna in Ramanujan 1973:88.

⁷² Ramanujan 1973:37 (emphasis added).

pathology, or a fanaticism, that thing from which we can easily distance ourselves and claim no responsibility in creating. That it is a phenomenon not so much *inevitably* produced but the only thing that *could* be produced by the discourses of modernity as we know them. That it is a rationality of and for modernity that we ignore only to produce it again, and then again.

The sadhu, passing by, laughs. The bhakta calms anxiety into devotion. And then, just as easily, a child lifts the mountain on his fingertip, and an ant devours whole the fourteen worlds.⁷³

⁷³ The references are first to the episode from Krishna's boyhood in Brindavan, when he lifts a mountain (Govardhana) to shelter humanity from a deluge; and second to a stanza by the bhakti poet Allama Prabhu in which the ant, the great enlightenment, consumes the distinctions of the world (cf. Ramanujan 1973:157).

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