

# The Social Dynamics of Communal Violence in India

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# The Social Dynamics of Communal Violence in India

Julia Eckert, Institute for Social Anthropology, University of Bern, Switzerland

This article analyses mobilization among Hindu nationalist organizations. Rather than seeking their attraction in their discursive outputs and the possible answers they might give in times of change, the contention is that this is to be sought in the specific internal dynamics and the possibilities they create within their historical context. These specific opportunities for action are inherent firstly in a mode of operation relying on participation and involvement, their direct intervention, localness, and accessibility. The dichotomization inherent in violence makes it possible to integrate different interests and discontents under a single banner and therefore contributes to the project of unification undertaken by Hindu nationalism.

## 1. Introduction

Communal riots, large scale pogroms and increasingly frequent bomb attacks have shaken India in the last decades. Riots, pogroms, and bombings have been interpreted as instances of an ever-escalating cycle of violence between Hindus and Muslims in the country, a cycle whose historical beginning is located differently by either side.

It is particularly Hindu nationalist organizations and authors who characterize these violent events as instances of revenge or self-defense. They locate the conflicts' origin in the Mughal conquest of India, followed by the partition of the subcontinent—both of which are interpreted as acts of Muslim aggression. Among official observers, too, a language of mutuality predominates; they identify a cycle of escalation in which both sides react to each other. Government reports, judges as well as senior police officers have often expressed the view that riots between Hindus and Muslims are “like epileptic seizures” (e.g. Srikrishna Commission report 1998, 4), casting them as symptoms of a fundamentally incurable disease. Similes of volcanic eruptions further naturalize communal violence or locate its sources in a mass psyche.

With regard to communal violence in India, the interpretative screen of escalation conceals more than it reveals. Narratives of conflict that focus on escalation, by implying a certain symmetry between the opponents and equal reactive motives that relate to the fear of the other, obliterate from view the diverse social dynamics that underlie and result from a conflict. The role of perceptions and claims of escalation in the social organization of a conflict appear to be intrinsic to the “framing” of the conflict, rather than describing its dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

There are several other explanatory narratives about communal violence in India. Many academic authors have interpreted communal violence in India in relation to sociopolitical changes in Indian society. Culturalist theories have proposed that communal violence is an expression of culturally different forms of political organization, of a cultural resistance to the ubiquitous expansion or “imperialism” of an alien concept like democracy and to the homogenizing nation-state in a society in which these are alien and inappropriate. Or that these forms of political organization are a perversion of the liberal democratic system

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<sup>1</sup> On the implications of assumptions of motives of revenge among Muslims see Eckert (forthcoming).

and its need for the organization of mass-bases for competitive politics. Authors like Ashis Nandy have claimed that the modern institutions of mass democracy and secularism distorted the modes of social relations of Indian society and were therefore responsible for the violence accompanying modern politics in India (Nandy 1990; Nandy and Sheth 1996). Satish Saberwal (1997) and T. N. Madan (1997), too, have held that Indian society is governed by traditional and deeply religious norms which cannot be accommodated by the modern state and its secular credo.

Setting aside such culturalist assumptions, socio-psychological explanations have pointed toward conditions of personal anomie in which ideas of charismatic leaders and the communities constructed by their ideas offer identity and guidance. This line of thought interprets political movements as reactions to processes of socio-cultural change, such as the impact of globalization on modes of community organization and collective identity. Gérard Heuzé (1995), Jim Masselos (1996), and Sujata Patel, for example, have proposed that the social dislocations and upheavals which have accompanied economic liberalization in India can help explain the increase of communal violence and the appeal of identity politics (Patel 1997).

Despite their differences, these authors agree in their interpretation of communal violence as a defensive reaction—not against the opponent in question, namely Muslims, but against the social change effected by globalization or Westernization. Communal group conflicts and religiously inspired violence thus are seen as defensive reactions against experiences of alienation, anomie, relative deprivation, and exclusion in the face of rapid socioeconomic change, urbanization, individualization, the devaluation of tradition and religion (Weber’s “disenchantment of the world”).

These contrasting strands of explanation of the motives underlying collective action, as either culturally determined

or as an attempt at compensation, indicate an understanding of collective violence as a reaction to given conditions. They pay little attention to the social dynamics that evolve in relation to conflicts within a group, and the possible motivation that can arise from them.

The current communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in India cannot be understood simply as a defensive reaction against globalization, against alien Western institutions, or against modernity as such. This appears as implausible for several reasons and cannot provide an explanation of how violence serves the role of compensating for the experiences of anomie.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this article asserts that communal violence has to be understood in relation to the Hindu nationalist project, which aims at enforcing a majoritarian idea of the state within a unity defined by religious affiliation (see Ludden 1996a, 1996b). The construction of the enmity between Hindus and Muslims, Hinduism and Islam—and its violent realization—are part of this aim of unifying the Hindu population and defining the nation against the republican idea established at independence. In the pursuit of this aim, Muslims become substitute enemies, operational Others. Violence appears as entirely endo-strategic,<sup>3</sup> and it operates through what Paul Brass has described as “institutionalized riot systems” (Brass 1997, 9). Narratives of a cycle of escalation, of self-defense, or of insecurity or an inferiority complex contribute to what Carl Schmitt described as the quintessential political operation, namely the distinction of friend and enemy (Schmitt 1983 [1928], 124).

If we consider the identity politics of Hindu nationalism as a proactive project, the role of violence has to be newly evaluated. The social-psychological phenomena implied in the analysis of violence as a reaction to anomie, or those implied in the assumption of a cycle of escalation, are not sufficient. Instead, two aspects of the politics of violence need to be understood: the affirmation of local networks (see

<sup>2</sup> Hindu nationalism’s enthusiastic embrace of globalization, especially economic liberalization in India since the 1990s, appears to contradict those analyses that locate the causes of extreme violence in the experience of anomie or alienation. As Thomas Blom Hansen has shown convincingly, the appeal of Hin-

du nationalism among the aspiring Indian middle classes is part of India’s struggle to gain recognition in the global arena (1996a) and to shed its association with poverty, underdevelopment, and passivity. Rather than wanting to hold globalization at bay and protect Hindu tradition, Hindu nationalism is actu-

ally a means to claim global membership—by means of excluding those who appear to hold India back. I have elaborated on these arguments in Eckert 2003. <sup>3</sup> Elwert 2004, 43; compare Coser 1972.

Brass 1997; Berenshot [forthcoming]); and the provision of opportunities to participate in local power. The capacity of violence to bind people to the project of Hindu-nationalism is to be sought in precisely these specific internal dynamics and the possibilities they create within their historical context. The success of Hindu nationalist organizations thus lies not simply in their nationalist credo but in the specific opportunities of action and participation that are inherent in their mode of operation and form of organization. They reset the terms of inclusion and exclusion not solely ideologically but also in a practical manner offering local possibilities of action. These specific opportunities for action are inherent in a mode of operation that relies on participation and involvement, direct intervention, and localness and accessibility. Violence is organized to create participation and empowerment among the participants. Participatory action achieves an expansion of the space for acting individually and collectively. I contend that the specific opportunities for action that are created by the politics of violence are what constitute its appeal. Moreover, the simple friend/foe dichotomization inherent in violence makes possible the integration of different interests and discontents under one banner and therefore contributes to the project of unification undertaken by Hindu nationalism.

## 2. Hindu Nationalism

*Hindutva* (Hinduness), the pivotal tenet of Hindu nationalism, posits the unity of all Hindus beyond any differences in the rites or beliefs of different *jatis* (castes) and sects.<sup>4</sup> It is unity in diversity, and also in inequality: the *Adhikari Bheda* (lit.: differential rights). In the harmonious-hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system, everything and everybody has its proper place and proper task.

The idea of unity in diversity found a republican form in Nehru's concept of the state and a multicultural one in the

thought of the Bengali poet Tagore; and Ramakrishna, a religious reformer who first coined the phrase, associated it with the syncretistic traditions of Bengal. But in Hindu nationalism as it was framed in the 1920s and 1930s by its founding fathers Keshav Baliram Hedgewar and Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar, the call for unity and harmony implied the denial and suppression of social conflicts such as caste conflicts. Ever since the founding of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—National Volunteers' Organization),<sup>5</sup> the organic concept of the nation with the Brahmin head, the Kshatriya arms, the Vaishwa stomach, and the Shudra feet of Hindu society has been vital to Hindu nationalist ideology. Evoking unity and union, therefore, was always also directed against the articulation of demands for equality within the group defined as Hindu.

The historical process of consolidation and canonization of Hinduism is part of the genealogy of Hindu nationalism. The development of the religious and social order on the Indian subcontinent from a highly diverse religious landscape with porous borders to a clearly defined and demarcated religion named Hinduism (Thapar 1985) was a modernizing process consisting of interlocking colonial-administrative, cultural-ritual, and political developments. At first, the category of Hindu was not religious: it was a denomination applied from the outside, and from a geographical perspective, to all the people who lived "behind the Indus" (Frykenberg 1989). In the 1911 census there were still approximately 200,000 persons who called themselves "Hindoo-Mohammedans" (Sarkar 1997, 11). Establishing a religious category of Hinduism required incorporation of a great variety of *jatis* (castes) and ritual practices and a multitude of gods (Sarkar 1997, 277; Basu et al. 1993, 7), whose followers shared no common self-designation and which did not add up to a unitary religion.

4 In a much-disputed decision in 1995, the so-called *Hindutva* judgment, the Indian Supreme Court called *Hindutva* the "way of life of all Indians"—thus agreeing with the Hindu nationalist groups' claim. A detailed discussion of the judgment can be found in Cossman and Kapur 1997.

5 The RSS was founded in 1925 in Nagpur. Hedgewar considered it foremost as an instrument of "cultural

work" and of character building (Basu et al. 1993, 24). It later expanded into a wide-ranging organizational network addressing all kinds of social and political matters (ibid., 34–50; Jaffrelot 1996; see also Andersen and Damle 1987). Its political wing, earlier the Jan Sangh, today the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP—National People's Party), was founded in 1951. The World Hindu Council (VHP), the international wing of the Sangh Parivar dedicated to cultural work, and

its youth organization, the Bajrang Dal, were established in 1964. More sub-organizations with specific purposes, including a trade union (founded in 1955), several women's organizations (starting in 1936), and the educational network Vidya Bharati with its primary and secondary schools, have gained importance, particularly in their integrating potential. The leaders of all organizations, including the BJP, India's former governing party, originated in the RSS.

The colonial administration's need for classification contributed to the definition of a uniform category (Pandey 1992, 23–65). With increasing modernization, group size and numbers became politically and administratively relevant. “Enumerated communities” (Kaviraj 1992, 50), created largely by the colonial census, determined group affiliations unambiguously and exclusively, making multiple or situational identifications impossible. At the same time, the colonial state assumed a neutral position with regard to the religious affairs of the groups defined by its own classifications and did not interfere in these matters.

These developments led to a codification of specific versions of different social practices (Kolff 1992, 231). It was during the colonial period, for instance, that the foundation for the religious personal statute was laid, which allowed everyone to settle family issues according to the rules of their religion—but only according to the laws of practices recognized as a religion by the colonial administration. The introduction of separate constituencies for Muslims in the late 1930s was meant to guarantee their political representation in the colonial committees, but it also increased political mobilization along religiously encoded group boundaries.

Administrative, cultural-religious, and political projects therefore reinforced one another in consolidating group boundaries. Administrative categories incorporated the classifications of religious self-representations, but only those forms of self-representation which complied with the criteria of classification of a modern administration system (Chatterjee 1995, 223): written form, unambiguity (Kolff 1992, 215–16, 231), and quantifiability. The categories originating in these administratively and politically motivated representations of Indian society then influenced forms of political organization, as the colonial state privileged some forms of social organization and ruled out others. Because the colonial powers assumed that community and religious formations were ultimately not political and indeed profoundly characteristic of the nature of the Orient, these organizations frequently had wider options for public action than more strictly political organizations (Freitag 1989, 284–91).

This colonial privileging of religious and community organizations, which has often been interpreted as a practice of “divide and rule” and which has been held responsible for increasing tensions between Hindus and Muslims (Pandey 1992), would never have been possible, however, had it not been able to connect to existing group differences (Freitag 1989). The distance between Muslim and Hindu political elites began to grow in the late nineteenth century. From the very beginning, Indian nationalism—organized in 1885 as the Indian National Congress—had Hindu religious traits. Key personalities supported the positions of the Hindu Right. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, for instance, the Maharashtrian Congress politician, revived religious and regional rites including Ganeshotsav, the festival of the elephant-head god, and the birthday of Shivaji, a western Indian warrior-king who had successfully fought the armies of the Mogul emperor Aurangazeb (Spear 1990, 172). This revival managed to circumvent the colonial ban on political gatherings by mobilizing people for religious events. At the same time Tilak used the festivals to counter Islamic public rites—particularly Muharram, which was then celebrated widely by Hindus as well—with specific Hindu festivals, thus shaping a clearly Hindu public (Jaffrelot 1998b).

While the Indian National Congress was able increasingly to present itself to the British colonial government as representative of the entire Indian population, references to a Hindu India (and an implicit identification of India with Hinduism) remained conspicuous in its political rhetoric.

With the religious tone Gandhi introduced into the independence movement of the Indian National Congress from the 1920s on, the fears of Muslim elites about their political exclusion from an independent India intensified. The Muslim League consolidated as the political representative of the Muslims of British India and put forward their demands for autonomous political representation within India (Jalal 1985). The “two nations theory,” proposed by Muhammed Ali Jinnah and seized upon by the British colonial government, confirmed the colonial idea of an endemic conflict between Hindus and Muslims and justified the eventual partition of the subcontinent.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For the history of the partition of the subcontinent and the different roles played by the Indian National

Congress led by Nehru and Gandhi, the Muslim League under Jinnah, and the British colonial

government under Governor-General Mountbatten, see particularly Jalal 1985 and Seervai 1989.

Independent India inscribed secularism in its constitution (articles 27 and 28). It committed itself to religious freedom (article 25) and constituted protection of minorities (articles 29 and 30). It institutionalised the personal laws of different religious denominations for matters of family law and in the Hindu Civil Code adopted a broad definition of Hinduism, which included Jains and Sikhs.<sup>7</sup>

There were two competing concepts of secularism, however. Gandhi rejected the separation of state and religion as impossible, particularly in India. To him secularism meant equal rights for all religions. Nehru, by contrast, pursued the classical liberal model of secularism as separation of “church” and state. Gandhi’s view predominated and was legally institutionalized in various provisions concerning religious practice (Cossman and Kapur 1997; Upadhyaya 1992).

The Hindu Right’s understanding of secularism follows Gandhi’s view but transforms it: because Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life, and thus is able to integrate people of all religious orientations without proselytizing, tolerance is considered the fundamental principle of Hinduism. “When Hinduism is no religion and is a way of life, to say that a Hindu state is anti-secular is wholly incorrect. [. . .] Hinduism is secularism par excellence.”<sup>8</sup> Equating Hinduism with secularism as well as presenting Hinduism as a way of life claims that it represents all Indian citizens, while at the same time limiting membership through religion. For Hindu nationalists, affiliation to Hinduism, and therefore to India, is defined by the concept of *punyabhoomi*, the holy land. Crucial for this vision of the nation was the territorialization of religion. In his text “Who is a Hindu?” Sarvarkar in 1923 equated “fatherland,” *pitribhoomi*, with “Holy Land,” *punyabhoomi*. All those who had their sacred sites on Indian soil, including Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists, could be considered legitimate Indians. Christians and Muslims, whose sacred sites were not on Indian soil, were by this definition excluded from legitimate political participation. The definitions of affiliation

to India and participation in the political community were based on a territorial understanding of religion.

From the very beginning, the Indian nation was, in the eyes of the central organization of Hindu nationalism, the RSS, *Hindu Rashtra*, land of the Hindus.<sup>9</sup> “Only the Hindu has been living here as a child of this soil,” the movement’s chief ideologist Golwalkar wrote (1996, 124). He drove Sarvarkar’s definition further, referring explicitly to German National Socialism: “Germany shocked the world by purging the country of the Semitic races—the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by” (Golwakar 1938, 27). The lesson to be learned was that “the non-Hindu people in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu-culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation [. . .] or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen’s rights” (ibid., 52).

While in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the disobedience of low castes, the changing role of women, and the contestation of the caste system generally were seen as a threat to the unity of Hindus (Sarkar 1997, 288), in the subsequent period internal conflicts were increasingly neglected in favor of the confrontation with Islam. Hedgewar had regarded the demands of the low castes for equality to be as threatening as those of Muslims (ibid.). But by the 1930s, in the writings of the RSS leader Sarvarkar, Islam had become the paramount threat to Hindus and Hinduism. The aggressive inclusivism of the early Hindu nationalism changed into an aggressive exclusivism directed at Muslims, which veiled the inclusivist strategy toward the unincorporated castes and sects.

7 Group rights beyond the personal statute, however, were linked not to religious groups, but to caste affiliation (Scheduled Castes [SC] and Scheduled Tribes [ST]); later quotas were established for Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Linguistic minorities also enjoy protection.

8 *Organiser* (January 21, 1996), the mouthpiece of the *Sangh Parivar*; quoted in Cossman and Kapur 1997, 153.

9 The RSS never participated in the anti-colonial movement; its nationalism was not directed against the foreign rule. In the 1930s, Hedgewar joined Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement and was arrested temporarily. He generally disregarded the independence movement as generating unrest.

### 3. The Construction of the “Other”

The idea that the Muslims of India were “foreign” was based on the subcontinent’s conquest by the Moguls. Political history was interpreted as a religious characteristic, the aggression of Islam. The essentialization of Islam was mirrored by the essentialization of Hinduism: where Islam was essentially aggressive, Hinduism was essentially tolerant. The orientalist glorification of the spiritual (Hindu) India (Inden 1990) and the idea of Hinduism’s superiority rooted in its inherent tolerance appeared in the nationalist discourse as early as 1893, with Vivekananda’s Chicago address (Vivekananda 1996 [1893]). It has taken deep root since then: the dogma that Islam is aggression and Hinduism is tolerance is common in urban India. It is often combined with an appeal to the Hindus to defend themselves, despite their innate tolerance, against the Muslims, whose religion is aggressive, hegemonial, and intolerant. The intolerant Muslim in this conception is also the strong Muslim. The reverse side of the tolerant Hindu then becomes the weak and cowardly Hindu: the positive and the negative sides of this self-image are closely connected. The inherent tolerance of Hindus turns into a weakness which must be overcome.<sup>10</sup>

The inferiority complex that some authors have identified when analyzing Hindu violence against Muslims (e.g. Jaffrelot 2003, 12–13) shows itself to be an integral part of the ideological discourse of Hindu nationalism. The self-orientalization inherent in the construction of the Hindu as weak, feminine, or defenseless is always connected to the call to arms and a justification of violence. The Sangh Parivar’s call for violence has been seen as an attempt to construct a Hindu identity which abandons orientalist visions of the passivity and spirituality of the East (Hansen 1996b).<sup>11</sup> And yet this call reproduces the orientalist images by referring to the Hindus’ alleged essential tolerance. In this discourse, to overcome the assumed weakness of Hinduism by way of violence does not lead to the abdication of tolerance. Since tolerance is essential to Hinduism, it is dissociated from specific practices. Rithambra, a *sadhavi* (ascetic) and one of the most

militant speakers of the Sangh Parivar, said during an election campaign of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh: “We are going to build our temple there [in Ayodhya], not break anyone’s mosque. Our civilisation has never been one of destruction. Intellectuals and scholars of the world, wherever you find ruins, wherever you come upon broken monuments you will find the signature of Islam. Wherever you find creation, you discover the signature of the Hindu. We have never believed in breaking but in constructing. [. . .] We are not pulling down a monument but building one. [. . .] We have religious tolerance in our very bones” (quoted in Kakar 1995, 204–5).

This paradoxical construction, which first forms a religion’s character through a historical memory (shaped, of course, by present concerns) of conquest and violence, and then detaches these constructed characteristics from correspondence to reality and thus renders them independent of action, is typical of essentializations. Each word of an “essence” abstracts from concrete practices.

Hindu nationalist violence is further neutralized by a discourse of defense. Hedgewar had already institutionalized paramilitary drill in the Shakhas of the RSS on the pretext of defending India against Muslim attacks. Statements by BJP politicians, RSS ideologists, and VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad—World Hindu Council) activists concerning the Gujarat pogroms in spring 2002 without exception invoked the necessity of defense, and participants in the violence insisted that Hindus had always been subject to Muslim attacks and that it was “about time to strike back.”<sup>12</sup> Each pogrom and riot has been accompanied by justifications of this type.<sup>13</sup> “Nations which do not raise even a finger to resist, perish,” remarked Bal Thackeray, leader of the Shiv Sena, in his mouthpiece publication *Saamna* (Dec. 15, 1992). He justified the riots of 1993 in an interview with *Time* magazine: “Muslims started the riots, and my boys are retaliating. Do you expect Hindus to turn the other cheek? I want to teach Muslims a lesson. [. . .] They [the Muslims] are not prepared to accept the rules of this land. They don’t

<sup>10</sup> Even Gandhi and his principle of nonviolence embody weakness for many—and naturally most of all for Hindu nationalists. Gandhi was after all assassinated by a long-time member of the RSS.

<sup>11</sup> The Sangh Parivar (family) is the association of different Hindu nationalist organisations affiliated to the RSS.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with the author in April 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the reports of different investigating committees, e.g. the Srikrishna Commission Report 1998.

want to accept birth control. They want to implement their Sharia in my motherland. Yes, this is the Hindus' motherland. [ . . . ] Have they [the Muslims] behaved like the Jews in Nazi Germany? If so, there is nothing wrong if they are treated as Jews were in Nazi Germany [ . . . ].”

The discourse of defense is the rhetorical figure *par excellence* for resolving the cognitive discord between tolerance and aggressiveness. One can be nonviolent in principle without renouncing the right to self-defense. In this case self-defense is collectivized and generalized: every Muslim becomes a symbol of threat, so that even an attack on individual, defenseless Muslims can be justified as self-defense; and even the smallest conflict can turn into an instance of the alleged existential threat to Hindus and Hinduism. “Hindutva is not a wave. It is a question of survival of our future generations; it is the breath of our life! If a Muslim is thrown out of any country, there are other Muslim nations where he can take refuge. Where will Hindus go? Except for our Hindu nation and neighbouring Nepal, there is no other place we can go to. That’s why we have to protect our Hindu land, and if need be, sacrifice our lives to save Hindutva.”<sup>14</sup>

The generalization of the threat relies on a diversified image of the enemy: Hindustan is endangered by the mere presence of Muslims—by their supposed disloyalty and by their imputed terrorism, but also by their many children and their poverty. In such an existential conflict, any aspect of the everyday life can become a symptom of threat—the birth of a Muslim child or a Muslim beggar, Muslims voting or retreating from public engagement.

After September 11th, 2001, the discourse of defense and self-defense in India was reinforced by the global perception of a ubiquitous threat based in essential difference, in a clash of civilizations. Hindu nationalists felt affirmed in what they had long advocated, namely that “Islam is

aggression” and that it was acutely necessary to arm for self-defense against it. “As one of the world’s major victims of terrorism, India clearly desires to be in the mainstream, not at the margins, of the international coalitions against terrorism,” wrote Brahma Chellaney, an Indian security expert who had called previous anti-terrorism efforts of India “soft.” He also claimed that India was “a sort of laboratory where major acts of terror are first tried out.”<sup>15</sup>

The confluence of a U.S. narrative of a clash of civilizations and its long-established Indian (or rather, Hindu nationalist) variant asserting the aggressive and intrinsically militant nature of Islam gave the latter a new status of international consensus. When these narratives seemed to be confirmed by the events, especially the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001, they spread beyond the ideological corner of Hindu nationalism into what is frequently called the mainstream.<sup>16</sup>

In this rhetoric of defense, Hindu nationalist organizations become the sole representatives of a just order, the only advocates of the rightful claims of Hindus. The majoritarianism of Hindu nationalism defines the entity it claims to represent (Randeria 1995, 3); it defines its legitimate claims; and through the politics of enemy images it asserts the superiority of these claims over others. It then maintains it is the sole advocate of these claims and, therefore, the only legitimate political representation of the people, as defined by Hindu nationalism. The legitimate political order is equated with the majoritarian claim of ownership of India, and all other political parties and the current secular order become traitors to the Hindus.

#### 4. The Parliamentary Rise of Hindu Nationalism

The parliamentary rise of Hindu nationalism shows clearly how intricately connected the projects of ideological and political unification were. Hindu nationalist organizations’ parliamentary influence and following began to expand sig-

<sup>14</sup> Bal Thackeray in a speech, quoted in Purandare 1999, 341.

<sup>15</sup> Chellaney 2001, 97–98. India immediately offered to cooperate in intelligence operations and to open its military bases and airfields to American forces

when the United States declared the “war on terror.”

<sup>16</sup> Hindu nationalist positions have never been confined to members of Hindu nationalist parties or organizations. Many of their tenets have been popular also among members of oppositional par-

ties, such as the Congress Party. Hindu nationalist stances toward the Muslim minority of India, among them the assertion of the natural aggressiveness of Islam and all Muslims, have spread so widely that they are taken as commonsense.



nificantly when, after decades of dominance, the Congress Party started to lose power. The integrational strength of the so-called “Congress system” (Kothari 1964) had always been based on the incorporation of local elites and different spheres of interests via networks of patronage (Frankel 1990). The system began to decline after Indira Gandhi centralized the party organization, which excluded local elites from active political participation (Kohli 1990, 386).

Independent political organizations, representing constituencies usually based on caste affiliation, gained political influence in the parliaments and through electoral successes. When, in 1990, V. P. Singh’s government introduced into law the recommendations of the Mandal Commission regarding quotas for “Other Backward Castes,” the BJP suddenly vastly increased its following among high-caste voters, who were formally disadvantaged by the quota policy. This support was particularly marked among the urban middle classes, who feared they would be affected by the reservation of positions in public service for lower castes. For the first time, the assertion that caste politics was threatening the unity of Hindus reached a broader public. But it also became obvious that this claim addressed very particular, urban middle-class high-caste interests.

For some time the following of the BJP remained limited to this electorate (Jaffrelot 1998a). Thus the party faced the problem of how to expand its base beyond this narrow constituency and to integrate into the project of Hindu nationalism those social groups whose independent political mobilization seemed to endanger the unity of the Hindus. The BJP directly competed with the emerging caste-based parties for “all the votes which had been let loose from the shredded net of Congress control” (Ludden 1996, b). The suggestion of an existential conflict which had been at the center of Hindu nationalist thinking became increasingly dominant in political discourse. The conflicts between castes, which were now being vociferously articulated by lower-caste politicians, were portrayed as irrelevant or at least as secondary in the face of the paramount threat of the Muslim presence in India. Rather than abandoning caste differences, Hindu nationalist rhetoric rearticulated caste relations in the form of a healthy body, with its Brahmin head, its Kshatriya arms, its Vaishwa body, and its Shudra feet.

#### 4.1 Divisions of Labor

When the BJP came to power in 1998, at the center of an alliance of various regional parties, it projected an image of efficient statesmanship and ideological moderation. Former Prime Minister Vajpayee of the BJP in particular was considered a moderate, experienced national politician. But this development did not indicate a general moderation of Hindu nationalist ideology when in positions of power. Instead, a division of labor emerged between militancy and statesmanship: the national BJP took on the role of self-confident national leadership, while some of its regional party organizations—as well as the other organizations of the Sangh Parivar, above all the VHP and its youth organization, the Bajrang Dal—continued their vociferous and militant campaign under the mantle of opposition. Disputes and conflicts within the BJP “family” arose about the rights of Hindus, the future of Ayodhya, and matters of law and order. However, in the long term this division of labor served the diverse strategies of mobilization and expansion. These conflicts ensured the fulfillment of the complementary stances of ensuring order and threatening uncompromising militancy within the same ideological fold. Militancy and order are both essential ideological ingredients of *Hindutva*: militancy in striving to realize an essentialist vision of the Hindu nation; order in the vision of a harmonious authentic society replacing a corrupt establishment—and overcoming the assertion of pluralist and antagonistic claims and related Western disorders.

This division of labor between militancy and statesmanship made possible the positioning of the national BJP’s brand of *Hindutva* as moderate, a source of order rather than disorder, harmony rather than riots. Parts of the BJP’s constituency were disturbed by the disorder caused by the communal riots that ravaged India in the wake of the BJP’s *yatras* announcing the political progress of the *Hindutva* agenda. The trading and industrialist community in particular feared disruption of the progress of liberalization and viable joint ventures. While *Hindutva* and its radical pronouncements did not lose their appeal as a thought system about political legitimacy, and possibly as a vague political model, the attendant violence was disturbing. The moderation forced upon the national BJP by its political compulsions and democratic aspirations was counterbalanced by the

militancy of the VHP and particularly its youth organization, the Bajrang Dal, as well as regional parts of the BJP and other regional Hindu nationalist parties such as the Shiv Sena. They assured their public that the upholding of law and order would not take priority over the causes of *Hindutva*. The political success of Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat, after the pogroms in 2002 resulted from his capacity to portray himself as representative of both aspects of the Hindu-nationalist project: militant *Hindutva* as well as investor-friendly market orientation.

In 2004 the BJP was—to the surprise of all—voted out of power at the national level. The ideological construct of unity laid out in *Hindutva* was not sufficient to persuade the lower castes of a common interest with the higher castes. The “Shining India” envisioned by the BJP campaign—associated with the booming new economy, high tech and software, shopping malls and jet-set lifestyles—had evidently excluded too many, especially among those who vote.<sup>17</sup>

The national election of 2009 confirmed the Congress-led coalition, again as a surprise to all observers. However, as the victories of the BJP in regional elections showed, the appeal of *Hindutva* did not decrease. Furthermore, *Hindutva*'s conceptualization of Hinduism, along with its identification of India with Hinduism, has become commonplace beyond its organizational proponents. It has achieved currency in many facets of everyday life. In this way the Sangh Parivar has achieved its objective, even when its parliamentary goals have been thwarted.

### 5. Making Hindu Nationalist Positions Plausible

Making conflict with Islam plausible to those who are meant to be integrated into the Hindu nationalist fold by it is not an obvious process. Why should other social conflicts, which affect people on an everyday basis and determine their life chances and possibilities, become less relevant than a conflict that was relatively distant from their everyday lives? The experience of caste violence and discrimination was, and still is, much more common for many Hindus than conflicts

with Muslims (Bremner 1999). So are the socio-economic disparities of Indian society. The plausibility lies not necessarily in the conflict itself but in the specific forms of social organization associated with it, both the local networks that are activated during collective violence as well as the organization of the conflict in violent actions.

Violence in conflicts serves to define unity absolutely, because it firmly establishes group boundaries. It generates unity symbolically as it affirms the borders between the in-group and the “others” that are potential targets of violence. It forces people to submit to its categories as there is no other place for them to feel safe. Violence ignores individual hybrid, multiple, or universalist identifications, reducing classification to friends and enemies (and sometimes a third group, the audience). In Indian history, particularly during the experience of partition, communal violence has confirmed and realized the perception of an existential conflict between Hindus and Muslims. After each riot, residential areas become further segregated (YUVA 1996). Economic chains of cooperation are interrupted and entire industrial sectors are restructured (Hansen 1996c, 192; Rai 1998, 73–75; Masselos 1996, 118–21). As a result, networks of solidarity that existed in neighborhoods, trade unions, or leisure clubs disintegrate.

In many cases following communal violence, social work is taken on by religious organizations that do not engage directly in communal incitement, but do convey religious practices which are “cleansed” of the many syncretisms shaping Indian Hinduism and Indian Islam. Today, for instance, the Tabligh movement is very active on the Muslim side. Many followers attached themselves to its firmly apolitical, puritan concept of religion, particularly after the riots, because the organization's political reserve seemed to offer protection and to support the retreat into the community. But the expansion of the Tabligh movement and its puritan concept of Islam also resulted in fewer regional or religious festivals being celebrated by both groups together, with Muslims not taking part in Hindu festivals even as guests. This reduction in shared social contexts makes it easier to spread

<sup>17</sup> Voting participation has spread to the poorer sections of the Indian population, to rural voters, and to women in the last two decades (cf. e.g. Yadav 2000).

rumors and stoke fears and prejudices.<sup>18</sup> The increased segregation frequently heightens communal tension.

The actual experience of conflict is, however, not the only reason for its plausibility. Violence can also bring about unity beyond such forced affiliations, by subsuming various types of conflict under the umbrella of the friend-enemy scheme to forge new political alliances. It often succeeds in addressing all divergent interests and social and political matters to unite them into one single struggle. The singular boundary drawn between “us” and “them” integrates and homogenizes the “us” and thus transgresses conflicting boundaries within the group it defines. Propounding the paramount role of community identity it thus provides “integrated identities” (Shah 1994, 1133; Elwert 1989, 451), reinforces imagined communities (Anderson 1983) and, moreover, by devaluing the “other” it provides groups status in which even, or particularly, lower rank members of the in-group can partake (Elias and Scotson 1990).

Moreover, in violent action, established local networks are activated and reaffirmed, mutual dependencies are deepened, and obligations are entrenched (Berenschot [forthcoming]). And finally, the type of violence most common in riots—unmediated violence directly involving the perpetrators, operating with weapons at close range, with little threat of sanctions—can provide experiences of participation and power that in themselves motivate further violent action.

Thus, the social organization of the violence defining the conflict operates on several levels: it integrates diverse issues ideologically and strategically; it reaffirms and consolidates networks of mutual obligations; and it provides space for action.

### 5.1. The Shiv Sena Party

An example of the social dynamics connected with such organization of violence is the Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist party mainly established in the state of Maharashtra, where it had a crucial role in integrating poor and low-caste sections of the population into the project of Hindu nationalism.<sup>19</sup>

The Shiv Sena promotes a violence-oriented, violence-celebrating type of actionism, and since its founding in 1966 it has presented itself as a protest movement. The Shiv Sena aims to recapture the state on behalf of its legitimate citizens, the Hindus, and to guard it from the grasp of “foreigners” (here also including the Italian-born leader of the Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi).

The fundamental principle of organization of the Shiv Sena is its strong local base. Like the organizations within the Sangh Parivar, it establishes itself in a dense network of local associations, the Shakhnas. The Shakhnas engage in numerous cultural and welfare activities, mostly short term and ad hoc. Through these efforts the nationalist idea of Hinduism is spread, popularized, and mixed with local religious and cultural symbols. Participants are drawn to these activities not necessarily by the political message, but often because they want to celebrate a festival, or receive help, or make use of educational offers. But the interpretation patterns of the conflict are reproduced through them: religious and regional celebrations gain a communalist tone; neighborhood festivals involve territorial claims of ownership and reproduce criteria of exclusion; the numerous martial arts groups associated with many of the local branches of the party gain an aura of national defense. Because these activities are not explicitly centered on the political message, they are even more effective: They are simply part of everyday practice and leisure occupations. Local cultural activities successfully combine their political agenda with the institutions, practices, and narratives of everyday life and offer to integrate all generations into a “family.” While the organizations of the Sangh Parivar had been limited to the urban middle classes for decades, the Shiv Sena’s ability to open up participation in these social and cultural activities has been crucial in expanding Hindu nationalism to new constituencies (Eckert 2001).

The social services that the Shiv Sena organizes claim to complement the inefficient infrastructure of the state. The Shiv Sena’s members, who call themselves the soldiers (*Sainik*) of the movement, assist with minor emergencies,

<sup>18</sup> Members of the Mohalla movement made it their business to restore such everyday contexts in order to prevent the violent es-

calation of conflicts (Eckert 2003b).

<sup>19</sup> The Shiv Sena is not part of the Sangh Parivar, but since the 1980s has become one of the most successful Hindu nationalist parties.

provide ambulances, collect money for local infrastructural projects, and so on. Its local leaders and party candidates—like those of other parties or members of organized crime groups—organize for water or electricity connections in slums and pay from their own funds for public toilets or the paving of streets.<sup>20</sup> In turn they expect votes and allegiance. The Shakha thus creates mutual obligations: it offers these local services in exchange for its clients joining in the violent agitations that the party organizes (Eckert 2003a, chap. 1). Recipients of welfare or assistance are expected to enlist in the “mob” when one is called for. Every Shakha Pramukh (head of a local branch) knows that for his own career in the party, command over such dependents is vital: “If you can’t provide a mob you are a flop,” said one Pramukh in an interview conducted in Mumbai in March 1997. Thus, it is not only votes that are exchanged for civic amenities and social services (as in the case of other parties), but also muscle power and mass.

Such power is not only activated during riots. It also serves in more everyday agitations and affirms the Shiv Sena’s claim to territorial sovereignty. It is used against rival gangs, against political opponents (who might likewise command their own mobs), and against those who refuse to subject themselves to the Shakhas’ local rule. Thus, when mass violence needs to be organized, certain structures are already in place, including collaborations, lines of command, and threats against opponents. These mutual obligations are reaffirmed and strengthened during violent agitation.

This diffusion of power to the level of the Shakhas concerns a large part of the Shiv Sena’s operations. Every member is thereby integrated directly into the organizational life and participates in local power and its profits. Sudha Churi, former president of the Mahila Aghadi, has expressed this principle by presenting violence and the power obtained from it as empowerment of the Indian woman: “Bring her out of the kitchen,” she described the role of such agitations. Through the organizational structure as well as the violent agitations, women could be offered a new public role, whose ideological

embeddedness in the traditionalism of Hindu nationalism evaded violating conservative norms or family structures (Basu 1995b, 179). Women would delight in newfound power over husbands, who have to submit to the arbitrations of the Shiv Sena’s family courts or risk being beaten; but they would also take delight in organizing and arranging actions, in making decisions and carrying them through, in claiming a voice, a public role, and local power. This power is always connected to the party’s violent agitations and threats, as the local power of every single party member is at all times covered by the collective power of the organization. The collective power is in turn produced by local social and cultural activities.

At the neighborhood level of the Shakhas, the Shiv Sena’s collective power became the individual power of the Sainiks, who can demand obedience. The attraction of such a role is not specific to the Shiv Sena; but the possibilities offered by the Shiv Sena to its members are specific to its politics of direct action. The party’s internal structure gives importance and relative autonomy to the local Shakhas, produced through the institutions and positions of power which the party has formed through violent actions in the public space.

This type of politics, therefore, offers its followers not only identity constructs, but real, practical possibilities of action and power. By means of the possibilities created by direct action, the Shiv Sena fulfils some of the ethos of participation and empowerment which the (anti-colonial) democratic discourse has established as legitimation of the post-colonial state (Chatterjee 1995, 216). All the more so because its activities combine the majoritarian claim of ownership of India with criticism of the state. The Shiv Sena acts as a vigilante of the “just order” and claims to protect the legitimate order by violating the illegitimate laws of an illegitimate government with its agitations. Its militant actions integrate all conflicts and dissatisfactions with the state as well as with the Congress Party, which it tightly identifies with the state.<sup>21</sup> The Shiv Sena joins claims to participation by a rising middle class with the political discontent of poorer groups, integrating these contrasting issues and reinterpreting them as

<sup>20</sup> On the question of how these funds are generated see Eckert 2003a, 25–30.

<sup>21</sup> Similar processes can be observed in other regional contexts, for instance in Uttar Pradesh (Basu 1995; Hassan 1996).

communal conflicts. Each conflict that involved a Congress politician, or the potential electorate of a Congress politician, was turned into a conflict in which the Congress Party and its representatives became symbols of the state, and the Shiv Sena became the advocate of the rights of the people—that is, of the Hindus. Through this binary scheme, the movement offered new alliances and coalitions to different parties. These different parties in turn were strengthened by these alliances in their opposition to the Congress Party (or to a party associated with Congress). Communal agitation, therefore, served the expansion of Hindu nationalism by freshly articulating caste and class relations and creating electoral alliances that could be used to counter the structures of incorporation of the Congress system (Hansen 1996c, 206).

The Shiv Sena's local electoral successes, which were founded on offers of social services as well as on communal mobilizations, facilitated the rise of persons from social groups who used to be largely excluded from the political sphere. In Maharashtra, political mobility had for a long time been blocked by the Congress Party's monopoly on political posts and career opportunities. The "Congress system", in which a few influential families of the Maratha caste had dominated in Maharashtra (Lele 1990), was effectively dismantled by the Shiv Sena's expansion. The party's offers to political newcomers were essential to integrating the opposition to the Congress Party. Under the broad umbrella of Hindu nationalism, the Shiv Sena became the vehicle of various oppositions to the Congress Party. Its criticism of an inefficient and corrupt polity thus became the legitimization of majoritarian claims, which supersede not only the state, but also its norms of legality and legitimacy.

These violent actions and the form in which they were justified and organized resulted in the expansion of Hindu nationalism and the spread of Hindu nationalist organizations. First, violence organized through the enemy image communalized local social conflicts and subsumed them under the "conflict of religion." Second, violence integrated different and frequently contrasting discontents with the Indian state as well as communalized criticism of the state. And third, violence offered participation and emancipation, and opened up new opportunities for action, which parliamentary forms of politics could not.

The integration of the discontents of different social groups and their reinterpretation in the Hindu nationalist frame have extended the majoritarian concept of the Indian polity beyond its initial constituency. Hindu nationalist mobilization and the omnipresence of majoritarian patterns of legitimation have brought about a sustained shift in the criteria of political legitimacy, standards of normality, and the right to plural and particular claims. They have not superseded other forms of political articulation and have not unified the Hindu population as much as they desired. However, they have normalized perceptions of a conflict with Muslims and the perception of India as ultimately a Hindu state. They have substituted the republican idea of the state with a religiously encoded majoritarianism, and have successfully advanced the canonization of Hinduism (Thapar 1985).

## 6. Epilogue

There has been much debate in India about whether communal violence is an expression of a Hindu mass movement, or whether it is cleverly manipulated and orchestrated by Hindu nationalist organizations (Basu 1995a, 35–78). Both are true: Hindu nationalism and its twin, communal violence, are mass movement and orchestration at the same time. The link between the two consists in the role of violence.

To describe violent actions simply as orchestrated misses the way such orchestration actually operates, how it convinces those that follow its call, and how it manages to entrench itself in the social relations and social imagination of the participants. And to describe communal violence simply as "troubles," or to confine it to a matter of two religious groups' mutual hatred, would deny the striking asymmetry between the groups—in the number of victims, but chiefly in the support of state authorities—as well as the systematic nature of the riots.

Pogroms like the ones in Gujarat in 2002 or those in Mumbai in 1993 do not happen because sentiments of hate suddenly break out. Close examination of a pogrom or riot quickly makes clear how crucial organization is. In a recent publication of the small news agency Tehelka, numerous members of Hindu nationalist organizations brag about their role in the riots. While expressing sentiments of

revenge, they speak of the planned nature of the assaults on members of religious minorities. The attackers, who arrived in lorries and were armed with petrol cans and weapons, had computerized lists of the residents that labeled their religious affiliations (Jaffrelot 2003, 12). Gujarat's VHP president admitted to having drawn up such a list on the morning of February 28. The Shiv Sena had similar lists in Bombay in 1993. VHP chief Jaideep Patel declared after the confiscation of swords and tridents in Gujarat: "We've been distributing these weapons since 1985. [. . .] Nobody has objected, not even the police."<sup>22</sup> It is obvious that implicit or open support by the government is decisive for the course of such riots (Engineer 1996, 130). "No riot can last longer than 24 hours if the state does not want it to," Police Inspector Vibhuti N. Rai insisted.<sup>23</sup> Rioters report that the police surrendered, indeed handed over Muslims—men, women, and children—to the attackers.<sup>24</sup> Police officers recount orders not to interfere against the violence;<sup>25</sup> judges explain how they managed to let off the few rioters who were charged.<sup>26</sup>

The involvement of state authorities, particularly the police, and the BJP government's refusal to end the pogroms as well as its explicit expressions of approval of the violence further manifested the claim of ownership of India, the majoritarian prerogative, and the "illegitimacy" of Muslims. The authorities' actions show clearly how far this claim of ownership has spread already, and how self-evident it has become for diverse sections of the Indian population.<sup>27</sup> "The

violence in Gujarat reflects the dissemination of hatred of the Other that had never before reached such intensity [. . .] or had ever been so widespread," writes Christophe Jaffrelot, agreeing with Ashis Nandy that this violence marked the beginning of a new phase in Indian politics (Jaffrelot 2003, 17). This new phase is characterized by the normalization of those Hindu nationalist claims that justify violence such as that perpetrated in Gujarat in 2002.

The characterization of the Muslim not only as foreign but also as aggressive—and in this respect fundamentally different from the Hindu—is pivotal for the construction of Hindu nationalism and the justification of violence. The conflict continues to be portrayed as an essential one, a "clash of civilizations," and as a question of the survival of Hindus and Hinduism. If enmity is an essential characteristic of the relationship between two groups, or if it is made out to be the characteristic of one culture as in the case of Islam, it becomes possible to continually reformulate the conflict, to adapt it to local and current opportunities, and ultimately to keep on re-enacting it. Ayodhya is only one symbol of the allegedly essential and therefore non-negotiable conflict between Hinduism and Islam. Such symbols are potentially infinite in number: Hindu nationalist organizations have another three thousand mosques on their list, and they no doubt will find still other symbols for the conflict.

<sup>22</sup> Patel in an interview with Indian Express, April 10, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Vibhuti N. Rai in an interview published in *Combat Communalism* 2 (6), February 1995.

<sup>24</sup> See the transcripts of the interviews on [www.tehelka.com](http://www.tehelka.com).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The reports from Gujarat note the participation of broad sections of the population on a new scale. Even the middle classes, it was said, had taken part in the pogroms, the arson attacks, and the hunt for Muslims. It was never entirely true

that communal violence was only the *lumpenproletariat's* doing, as is often claimed by these same middle classes. It was among the middle classes that the views of Hindu nationalism first found a sympathetic ear and the BJP was able to recruit its voters. The Hindu nationalist organizations are made up mainly of middle-class members.

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