

Globalization, Religious Strife, and the Media in India

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Abstract

Participating in the global market has changed not only India's economy but also its culture. Perhaps as a reaction to Westernization and Christian missionary work, a fundamentalist Hindu movement called the Hindutva movement has gained popularity in India. The cultural movement became strong enough to allow its political front electoral victory in the 1999 elections. This essay examines the Hindutva movement's fundamentalist character in the context of recent transformations in postcolonial India.

Introduction

Upon visiting Bangalore, a city of some six million people in South India, in the summer of 2004, I was struck by the billboards for Western products. Pizza Hut, Cadbury's, and others advertised their products alongside Tata and Vimal. On the streets, white faces mingled with brown ones. East Asian, European, and Slavic conversations created new sounds with the cadence and accents of Indian languages. Food vendors offered vegetable burgers alongside samosas. The signs of globalization were dominant in this city. In other parts of India, the signs were not as prominent. However, globalization was the buzzword used by businessmen, politicians, and intellectuals to partly explain the rapidly changing face of India. Participating in the global economic market has had other consequences for this country of a billion people. The cultural fabric has experienced constant wear and tear as Western modes of behavior and work were gradually incorporated into everyday life. This essay examines the changes and situates the growth of the fundamentalist movement in the context of transformations in post-colonial India.

Illustrating these changes is the fact that large houses are slowly gaining prestige with neighbors struggling to keep up with the Patels and the Raos. As materialism takes hold in India, getting into debt, a previously unfamiliar concept, is consequently becoming more common. For example, many farmers took on loans to fund their agricultural businesses. However, the rains, a necessity for the agricultural business did not arrive and the persistent drought from 2001- 2003 led to the loss of income, and consequently, to bankruptcies. For some farmers, it was too much to bear. Several farmers along with their families actually committed suicide ("Four farmers commit suicide," 2004). Responding to the tragedies, one of the affected States passed a bill declaring a six-month moratorium on repayment of loans taken by farmers from private moneylenders. While agriculture has suffered in this new market economy, other aspects of society have flourished. In particular, the Information Technology (IT) boom is an economically profitable aspect of globalization. Emerging as a

source of cheap labor, the Indian IT industry is creating jobs, thereby raising the standard of living.

The Hindutva Movement

Although India was experiencing obvious socio-economic changes brought on by globalization, the evolution was by no means unidirectional. The country was simultaneously undergoing a resurgence of traditional Indian values fueled in large part by a specific counter-culture movement referred to as the "Hindutva movement". While the Western-based globalization was economically driven and product based, the Hindutva movement was concerned with engaging people at the cultural level. Unlike Gandhi's freedom movement that emphasized the use of Indian products like Khadi, this one connected Indianness to being Hindu and drew upon the historical superiority of India's ancient past to create a sense of self-worth and self-identity. The Hindutva movement, operating at many different levels, became strong enough to allow its political front electoral victory during the 1999 elections. In the process, some crucial aspects of Indian history were re-defined.

Saffronization and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)

The reinterpretation of history, with an emphasis on Hindu cultural values, is called "saffronization." Saffron is the color associated with Hinduism. Saffronization has tinted the school systems and its ideas are incorporated into school textbooks. Curricular changes have occurred in colleges, universities, and even at the post-graduate level. For instance, universities were compelled to teach Hindu Scriptures, the Vedas. When challenged, the Supreme Court ruled that such training was acceptable because the Vedas were secular. Saffronization, however, is a visible part of a Hindutva philosophy that has strong historical and religious underpinnings. The concept of Hindutva, which emphasizes that Hindus make up a nation, is not new. In fact, the national organization of volunteers "The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)", is a powerful Hindu right-wing organization founded on the belief that Hindus constituted a nation. Hindus are regarded as those inhabitants who live in the lands between the river Sindhu (Indus) and the high seas, and whose scriptures are the Vedas. Savarkar (1923) describes the essentials of Hindutva: a common nation (Rashtra); a common race (Jati); and a common civilization (Sanskriti). Based on these principles, the RSS was established in 1925.

Members belonging to the RSS take an oath "for the betterment of my sacred Hindu religion, Hindu culture, and Hindu community, I will devote myself to the prosperity of my Holy Motherland" (Noorani, 2000, p. 5). All other religions and communities co-existing in the Motherland are excluded from the oath's betterment process. True to their oath, RSS members work in all areas of Indian life. It is the only organization that has repeatedly involved itself in the minutest levels of social and political life. The RSS not only participates actively and forcefully in the electoral process, but also engages in all aspects and levels of social activity. Its principal goal is political control through cultural homogenization (Madan, 1997).

In the course of seeking cultural oneness, the RSS has been involved in violence against differing factions and individuals posing real or perceived threats to their organizational principles and practices. In particular, Muslims and Christians have suffered at the hands of this organization. Nevertheless, religious alignment with Hinduism does not assure one's safety from state terror. Perhaps the best example to illustrate this point is the

fate of Gandhi: Gandhi, a Hindu, was assassinated by Godse, an RSS member. Godse considered Gandhi to be an enemy of Hindu cultural ideals and political interests (Nandy, 1980). The RSS is part of the Sangh Parivar or Sangh family, which includes the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The VHP consists of Hindu religious leaders. The youth wing is called the Bajrang Dal. The Bajrang Dal had a "central role in Advani's rath yatra from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in September-October 1990. The Bajrang Dal's volunteers offered him a cup of their blood as proof of their commitment and kept him company throughout. The riots that followed were their handiwork" (Noorani, 2000, p. 71). Banned for two years following the riots, the organization is now suspected of involvement in the communal violence that shook Gujarat in 2002. Over two thousand people, mostly Muslims, were killed in an act of vengeance against the previous killing of fifty-four Hindus.

Fundamentalism

Such violence perpetrated by some of its adherents is one aspect of the Hindutva movement. Sweeping across India in the late 1980s and capturing the polls in 1999 it has all the trappings of a fundamentalist movement. Fundamentalism is a reaction to perceived danger, and its adherents are characterized by a belief in the final authority of their own scriptures (Lawrence, 1989; Marty and Appleby, 1991). They are intolerant of disagreement with their views (Barr, 1978). Believing that their current community life is not okay, fundamentalists appeal to tradition in a "selective manner that establishes a meaningful relationship between the past and the present, redefining or even inventing tradition in the process" (Madan, 1997, p. 28). Relying on charismatic leadership, fundamentalists aim to capture political power and redesign the state to achieve their goals.

An examination of the features of the Hindutva movement clearly shows it to be a fundamentalist movement. The imposition of Vedas on India's educational system and the glorification of India's past are clear indicators of fundamentalism. Furthermore, linking the nation of India to a Hindu nation redefines Indianness. In public utterances, being Indian is connected to being Hindu. For instance, in a recent speech, the BJP party president stated that "Hindutva", "Bharatiya" and "Indianess" were synonymous ("Adrift in Defeat," 2004).

Public spaces are gradually becoming public Hindu spaces. Under the peepal and banyan trees, long used as places for rest and shade along bus routes, little statues of gods or the letter Ohm is carved in stone turning it into a Hindu temple. Hindu temples can be ostentatious buildings; they can also be small humble places with a few statues of deities. It is the latter kind of temple that is cropping up in unlikely places. Although the RSS is regarded as a social and cultural organization, it actively supports a political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which held power from 1999 to 2004. Using religious appeal to mobilize Hindus to vote for their party, Vajpayee, Advani and others succeeded in obtaining political power in 1999.

Violent consequences

Political power at the Center (i.e., the national level) enabled the RSS and others to be less restrained in their violence against minorities. Bombings of churches, death of priests, publicly claimed as uprisings against forced conversions from Hinduism to Christianity made the news in the summer of 2000.

Furthermore, the violence against Muslims in the state of Gujarat was brutal and occurred as the police and military stood by and watched the carnage under order from

Gujarat's Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, a member of the BJP. Months later, at a press conference, Vajpayee, the BJP leader, who lost the 2004 election, held the Gujarat violence responsible for the loss.

Discussion

Researchers consider fundamentalism a reaction to a perceived threat and a movement to return to one's religious roots (Caplan, 1985; Lawrence, 1989; Marty and Appleby, 1991). In India, Westernization has emerged as the perceived external threat for the Hindutva movement whose ideological base is its version of the origins and philosophy of Hindu religion. Cast in the light of a reaction to Western dominance, the movement captured the imagination of those who were disapproving of Western values. The movement gained ground on the promise of preserving what is Indian against the onslaught of alien values. Madan (1997) states that criticism of the Western way of life is one of the features of the RSS ideology. Even the Westernized Hindu is regarded as the internal enemy of Hindu culture. Golwalkar (1980), a supreme leader of the RSS wrote that the "pure and sublime character" of the Hindu nation has been sullied by "a thousand-year long corroding influence of foreigners" (p. 163). More recent criticisms have centered on lifestyle issues such as eating habits. Serving beef at an Indian McDonald's, for example, has met with sharp criticism. As Renou (1953) stated, "In India everything is in one sense older, and in another sense of more recent origin than is generally supposed" (p. 46).

The liberalization of the economy, the emergence of multinational corporations, and the changing media environment are important recent transformations in postcolonial India. However, the RSS philosophy has remained the same. The RSS philosophy, "the stress on militarism, the doctrine of racial-cultural superiority, ultra nationalism infused with religious idealism, the use of symbols of past greatness, the emphasis on national solidarity, the exclusion of religious or ethnic minorities from the nation-concept – all of these features of the RSS are highly reminiscent of fascist movements in Europe" (Smith, 1963, p. 96). The stinging analysis is valid even today.

The hope, I believe, lies with the vast majority of Hindus who are tolerant of other religions. For instance, when the Babri Masjid was destroyed on December 6, 1992, "the common Hindu was shocked and saddened" (Noorani, 2000, p. 80). Hope also lies with most of the minorities who practice tolerance rather than engage in divisive behaviors themselves. According to (Madan, 1997):

Secularism, in India "has been defined as equal respect for all religions – sarva dharma samabhava – on behalf of both the state and the citizenry." In the Preamble to the Constitution, secularism is rendered in Hindi as "the neutrality of the state in relation to different religious communities." (p.31)

The constitution clearly does not privilege any one religion over another. Noted author, Nirad Chaudhuri (1987) wrote:

In India secularism of even the highest European type is not needed for Hinduism as a religion is itself secular and it has sanctified worldliness by infusing it with moral and spiritual qualities. To take away that secularism from the Hindus is to make them immoral and culturally debased. (p. 881)

However, given the current state of affairs, it is evident that Hindu secularism is neither a part of the growing Hindutva movement nor an acceptable philosophy for those who have come to believe that being Indian is following a certain version of Hinduism.

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