The Saffron Wave

DEMOCRACY AND HINDU NATIONALISM IN MODERN INDIA

THOMAS BLOM HANSEN
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Introduction

Hindu Nationalism and Democracy in India

Within the past decade, the Hindu nationalist movement in India, led by the militant organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with branches and subsidiaries in many fields of life in contemporary India, has grown into the most powerful cluster of political and cultural organizations in the country. Hindu nationalist agendas, discourses, and institutions have gradually penetrated everyday life and have acquired a growing, if not uncontested, social respectability in contemporary Indian society.

In the general elections in February 1998, the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), polled more than a quarter of the popular vote in India and emerged as the largest party in the Lok Sabha in Delhi. In late March 1998, the BJP’s leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee, became India’s prime minister, in charge of a fragile coalition government formed by the BJP and twelve smaller regional parties. Less than two months later, on the 11th and 13th of May, in Pokhran in the Rajasthan desert, five nuclear bombs were tested. This instantaneously put India on the global map as a nuclear power and initiated a new phase in the decade-old arms race between India and Pakistan, and it generated deep worries in western governments and publics. The decision to assert India’s place in the world by acquiring nuclear capabilities was met with general approval among political parties in India from left to right. The response from newspapers seemed even more positive, opinion polls indicated overwhelming support to the decision, and the BJP could now appear on the domestic scene in its much-desired role as the most resolute defender of India’s national pride and its national interest. When a local RSS organizer in the western state of Gujarat told a journalist, “after the nuclear tests, many other nations have realized that India is not merely a developing nation, but a superpower,” he was not merely articulating a Hindu nationalist sentiment. His and the RSS’s exhilaration at a newfound national self-respect seemed to resonate with widely held perceptions of nation, cultural pride, and India’s place in global hierarchies. Complex questions of how, and why, India’s Hindu nationalists could acquire the authority to enunciate this broader quest for recognition and national identity—of how and why they could ensure their
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popular mandate to govern—arise out of these recent events. One strand of academic work explains the current dominant position of the Hindu nationalists as the result of decades of systematic, painstaking organizational work and imaginative political strategies (Jaffrelot 1996; Basu et al. 1993). Another strand interprets Hindu nationalism in more cultural and historical terms, and argues that the Hindu nationalists could be successful because they were drawing on older reserves of “religious nationalism” that always were central to most forms of Indian nationalism (see for example, van der Veer 1994).

This book is about the processes that moved Hindu nationalism from the margins of Indian society to its center stage. It tries to incorporate both these strands of academic work on Hindu nationalism, and in some ways to go a step further. The book explores some of the broader conditions of possibility in terms of political discourse—forms of governance and political strategies—that made it possible both to enunciate the notion of a “Hindu nation,” and to organize it in changing forms up to the present day. I try to understand the history and contemporary articulations of the Hindu nationalist movement in terms of how, in various periods, it was made possible (and impossible) by broader discursive formations of nationalisms; by broader issues of identity, particularly in contemporary urban India; and by continuities and discontinuities between colonial and postcolonial governmentali-
ties, regimes, and genres of political representation.

My main argument is that Hindu nationalism has emerged and taken shape neither in the political system as such nor in the religious field, but in the broader realm of what we may call public culture—the public space in which a society and its constituent individuals and communities imagine, represent, and recognize themselves through political discourse, commercial and cultural expressions, and representations of state and civic organizations. The Hindu nationalists desire to transform Indian public culture into a sovereign, disciplined national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient Hindu past, and to impose a corporatist and disciplined social and political organization upon society. According to the movement, the Indian nation can only be reinvigorated when its rightful proprietors, the Hindu majority, resurrect a strong sense of Hindutva (Hinduness). This majoritarian call for Hindutva combines well-established paternalist and xenophobic discourses with democratic and universalist discourses on rights and entitlements, and has successfully articulated desires, anxieties, and fractured subjectivities in both urban and rural India. I argue that Hindu nationalism represents a “conservative revolution,” prem-
tion of both the political field and the public culture in postcolonial India. The intensification of political mobilization among the lower castes and the minorities has, along with the rise of ambiguous desires of consumerism in everyday life, exposure to global cultural and economic flows, and so on, fractured social imaginings and notions of order and hierarchy, not least within the large middle class and dominant communities in contemporary India. I argue that it was the desire for recognition within an increasingly global horizon, and the simultaneous anxieties of being encroached upon by the Muslims, the plebeians, and the poor that over the last decade have prompted millions of Hindus to respond to the call for Hindutva at the polls and in the streets, and to embrace Hindu nationalist promises of order, discipline, and collective strength.

Hindu Nationalism and Postcolonial Trajectories of Democracy

One of the most remarkable features of the entire phenomenon of Hindu nationalism is the relative ease with which it has fitted into most of the authorized discourses on India and more generally on politics and culture in the postcolonial world, as they circulate inside as well as outside India. The advent of Hindu nationalism, the images of Hindu zealots razing the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, and of firebrand orators in front of massive crowds, seem to resonate all to well with dominant perceptions of Indian democracy as somehow incomplete and immature: full of corruption, vulgar manipulators, campaigning film stars, colorful imagery presented to impressionable illiterates not capable of making qualified choices.

We should, however, remind ourselves that Hindu nationalism has emerged out of the longest, most sustained, and most successful trajectory of democracy anywhere in the postcolonial world, at the moment of its most decisive turn toward an unprecedented degree of pluralism, in the wake of the disintegration of Congress’s sway over the Indian state and polity. Hindu nationalism’s political success does not, in other words, grow out of the deficiencies of democracy but is the product of a series of intensely fought elections over the last decade, and of equally intense battles over religious sites, rituals, and spaces; over the meanings of shared symbols of Indian culture; over the meaning of secularism, history, and so on. However much we may disagree with the objectives and with the pompous and xenophobic style of the Hindu nationalist movement, and without exonerating its frequent
reliance on violence and hate speech, we have to admit that the movement has grown and come to power largely by obeying the procedures of parliamentary democracy. The authoritarian organization of the movement and much Hindu nationalist rhetoric leave no doubt that many Hindu nationalists have only a skin-deep commitment to democratic procedures. Nonetheless, the very fact that this movement has had to respect the judiciary, the electoral process, and the “rules of the game” in the political field testifies to how well-entrenched democratic procedures are in India. At the same time, the success of Hindu nationalism has also revealed how feeble the notions of tolerance, equality, and rights have become within large groups of the relatively privileged Indians who form the core of the BJP’s constituency.

This opens the larger question of the forms that democratic discourse and practices have historically taken in India. Was the political culture of the so-called liberal middle class, which provided the backbone of the nationalist movement and later the independent nation-state, ever liberal and democratic? Or was it rather dominated by a paternalist nationalist discourse within which ordinary Indians merely provided the necessary but uncomfortable numerical strength? Is Hindu nationalism really revealing the dark side of the middle-class culture and social world of the “educated sections” who have dominated Indian public culture and the Indian state for so long—the authoritarian longings, the complacency, and the fear of the “underdog,” the “masses,” and the Muslims?

The Indian experience of democracy thus challenges several of the widely held assumptions about the universality of the western trajectory of liberal democracy. It points to the pertinence of Mamdani’s observation that the histories of the postcolonial world cannot be written through simple analogies, as distorted or “incomplete” rehearsals of the “western” story line (Mamdani 1996, 9)—in itself, one should add, a major object of historical fictionalization. One of the tenets of the ideal “western” story line is that democratic governance, once established and consolidated, is self-sustaining because it produces a more rational form of organization of interests, checks the executive agencies of the state, and produces a democratic culture that provides more tolerance and more pluralism. The recent Indian experience of Hindu nationalism should remind us that democracy also very often gives birth to forces, desires, and imaginings of an authoritarian and anti-democratic nature, or “majoritarian” and moral backlashes against what is seen as “excessive liberalism” in the public culture. This is certainly true of both European and North American history in this century. These same historical experiences, and more recent de-
developments in the western world, should also remind us that education, literacy, and economic prosperity by no means diminish or counteract the recurrent constructions of ethnic majoritarianism, intolerance, and desires for strong governance that also develop and proliferate in the heart of developed democracies. On the contrary, historical experience from most parts of the world points to the fact that educational institutions, literate public spheres, and the social world of the upward mobile classes, anxious to consolidate their status and gain recognition from their surroundings, are rather the sites of the production of ethnic intolerance and xenophobias.

Hindu nationalism could not consolidate any major constituency among the millions of marginalized poor and illiterate Indians. Instead, the xenophobic discourses of Hindu nationalism developed in the heart of the large and expanding middle class, which political common sense today holds to be the very prerequisite for creation of stable democracies in the postcolonial world. It was in these mainly urban environments, rich in education, associational life, and what Putnam would characterize as “civic engagement” and “social capital” (Putnam 1993, 163–70), that the Hindu nationalist movement has found its most receptive audiences. To understand and interpret contemporary Hindu nationalism in India we need, in other words, to map how the specific trajectory of Indian democracy and the historically changing governmentalities of the modern Indian state have shaped political imaginaries and public practices of the Indian middle class.

Political institutions and competitive political mobilization have historically been pivotal in the Indian experience of modernity. The nationalist elite in India was a political elite that developed a rather condescending vision of social uplift of the masses through education and enfranchisement. They created a form of public culture marked by radical rhetoric and high idealism, but more enduring social structures such as caste hierarchies, family structures, upper-caste norms of public behavior, and so on, were rarely challenged. In the nationalist movement and in the first decades after independence a peculiar cultural construction of politics as a “virtuous vocation” emerged. Here upper-caste notions of selfless duty and purity were inscribed into the construction of the ideal national citizen. Politics and the affairs of state were constructed as the realm of enlightened men of superior moral fiber. The process of democratic participation in the postcolonial democracy was seen as a central tool in this civilizing, and essentially pedagogical, mission, in which the masses under prudent guidance were to learn how to appreciate their new role as secular citizens of the nation. This elitist political culture, seeking to mass-produce national
citizens in its own image, could be sustained as long as one dominant party, embodying the nation, could control and envelop both the political processes and the administrative machinery of the state.

Interpreting de Tocqueville’s notion of the democratic revolution within a wider field of social practices, Claude Lefort has suggested that one of the most characteristic features of processes of democratization is the often tacit and gradual “dissolution of markers of certainty” pertaining to the solidity of institutions, the credibility of dogmas, and the assumed “naturalness” of a hierarchical social order. Historically, powerful forces have attempted to restrict democracy to a set of strictly procedural routines for governance and legislation, but once in motion, democratic procedures have over time tended to remold the very form in which a society represents and imagines itself, its institutions and its history.

It is my contention that the history of Indian democracy may be fruitfully interpreted in these terms as a gradual and circumscribed questioning of hierarchies and authority, spreading from the political field to other realms in society. As the political field acquired even more prominence due to the weight of the developmental state in all spheres of society in the 1970s, a new political culture marked by “political entrepreneurship” emerged. This gave rise to a new construction of politics as an “amoral vocation,” a construction that reflected a widespread discomfort with the proliferating populist techniques of political mobilization and governance, and a disapproval of the new breed of public figures from modest social backgrounds who used their language, manners, and social background to consolidate mass followings. In the face of this “plebeianization” of the political field, sections of the educated urban middle classes and upper-caste groups began to denounce the political vocation, question the legitimacy of the state, and discard the principles of democracy and secularism.

For decades democracy and secularism meant protection and extension of social privileges to the educated Hindu middle classes, and condescending paternalism vis-à-vis lower-caste groups and minorities. However, as it became clear that political democracy was slowly giving birth to this new and unfamiliar form of society, the “softness” of the secular state became the target of the Hindu nationalist critique of a “pseudo secularism” that was “pampering minorities.” Anti-democratic attitudes are today widespread in the same urban middle class in India that for years was regarded as the bedrock of political democracy in the country, and the backbone of the nation. Hindu nationalism emerged successfully in the political field in the 1980s as a kind of “conservative populism” that mainly attracted more privileged
groups who feared encroachment on their dominant positions, but also “plebeian” and impoverished groups seeking recognition around a majoritarian rhetoric of cultural pride, order, and national strength.

The trajectory of the “saffron wave” in India has, as I have suggested, broader implications for the understanding of democracy in the non-western and postcolonial world. The immense scale, duration, and richness of the experience of democracy in India, a society pervaded by a multitude of hierarchical social forms, allows us to see, first, that the procedures and discourses associated with democracy profoundly modify and transform a society’s imagination of itself. Democracy does not merely provide a form of governance but modifies social practices, institutions, and social imaginaries. We must acknowledge that democracy gives rise to a new imagination of society that makes new identities and claims possible, but also makes possible new forms of violent conflict and new fantasies of power and xenophobias. Many of these claims today take a specific cultural form because the objectification and codification of cultural differences and boundaries was one of the paramount governmentalities of the colonial states, to which the postcolonial state in India, like other postcolonial states, are the heirs. The fact that claims of cultural collectivities and identities are dominant forms of political identity in India and in other postcolonial societies does not make them “deformities” in relation to the liberal western political trajectories, but rather results of the specific historiocities and “vernacularization” of democratic discourses and procedures in the postcolonial world.

In the light of this, the success of the Hindu nationalist movement is, second, not the “revenge” of a society where western forms of governance and political discourse—such as democracy—remain unintelligible and alien due to a deep and enduring civilizational incommensurability. Practices of democratic politics are never “the same” all over the world, but are always embedded in historically specific but also changing “cultural constructions of politics” and public culture. Democracy always tends to produce an ever more politicized society in which “undecidability” reigns and expands, that is, where institutions, identities, and social horizons are unstable and always contested. The Hindu nationalist movement is both an expression of this politicization of Indian public culture and a reaction against it. It is, if anything, a “revenge” of colonial governmentality more than any representation of Hindu culture as such.

Third, the democratic experience in India also shows us that although the notion of equality that lies at the heart of democracy has not
produced social equality, it has made a certain representation of “the ordinary” of paramount importance in politics. Charles Taylor has argued that the celebration of “ordinary life”—hard work, family life, simple virtues—were central to the construction of modern identity (Taylor 1992, 211–305). The “ordinary” was in the European and American experiences shaped by religious sects and capitalist transformations, whereas democratic politics seems to have been its primary midwife in India. Although the elitist democracy of the first decades after 1947 governed “the masses” as subject of a benevolent state, these “masses” have, through populist leaders, acquired a new assertive visibility in the political field. The Hindu nationalist movement reacts against this perceived encroachment on middle-class society, but it needs, at the same time, to project “the ordinary” onto the ideal national Hindu citizens it seeks to produce.

Hindu Nationalism and the Imaginings of India

The authorized colonial and orientalist knowledge of India as a deeply religious society with self-born, resilient social and cultural institutions is still crucial in academic and political understanding of India. In the western world this form of knowledge could explain recurrent episodes of riots and killings in South Asia as effects of the persistence of premodern religious passions and fanaticism. In India, knowledge of the deeply religious ordinary Indian did for decades imbue many educated Indians with a paternalist sense of being part of a “civilizational mission” of modernity vis-à-vis “the masses.” In the hands of the Hindu nationalists, the same knowledge could promote a single reified “Hinduism” as the natural matrix of the true Indian nation. Without transgressing these established tenets of what India “really is” to millions of Indians, the Hindu nationalist movement could stage its bid for remolding the public culture of India and for winning political power in the Indian state as the natural, inevitable, completely unpolitical reaction of ordinary, pious Hindus against a culturally insensitive, westernized, and corrupted state.

Hindu nationalism has indeed successfully recruited and subsumed religious sentiments and public rituals into a larger discourse of national culture (Bharatiya culture) and the Hindu nation, Hindu rashtra. There is little doubt that new social or religious practices, especially in urban India, have made this specific political “packaging” of Hindu symbols intelligible to larger audiences; but the objectives and practices of the Hindu nationalist movement go far beyond religion and ritualized practices. As I hope to show, Hindu nationalist discourse and
practices are centrally concerned with notions of national honor and how a vibrant sense of national community can stabilize social identities, governance, and the larger social order, and ultimately extract a much-desired global recognition of India’s place among the leading nations in the world. The notion of Hindutva makes sense not primarily because of any religious subtext but because it is made to connect meaningfully with everyday anxieties of security, a sense of disorder, and more generally the ambivalence of modern life.

The emergence of Hindu nationalism in India also seems to fit all too well into the system of essentialized cultural stereotypes and differences of “civilization,” the common-sense ordering of the globe to which Samuel Huntington lends some scientific authority. Like Huntington, foreign policy analysts, and most of the religious nationalists across the globe analyzed by Juergensmeyer (1993), Hindu nationalists also understand and order the world through “cultural essentials” of religion, blood, and other practices related to the body—food, marriage, death. According to this view, India was always and will remain fundamentally Hindu in a civilizational sense, just as (it implies) Muslims and other non-Hindus always were alien to India and will remain so forever. The secular Indian nation state is in the Hindu nationalists’ view a political fiction that conceals real cultural incommensurabilities, or in their words, a “culturally alien” construction imposed on India by anglicized intellectuals.

My argument is that the notion of a single Hindu culture, incommensurable with Islamic or western epistemes and forms of organization, is the real fiction at work here, imposed by orientalism and painstakingly promulgated, organized, and reformulated by generations of Hindu nationalists and other Indian nationalists for more than a century. I also argue that in order to understand Hindu nationalism we need to analyze carefully the official secularism it opposed. Textbook versions of secularism as the absence of religion from the public sphere, or a more fashionable understanding of secularism as a metonym of scientific rationalism, will not suffice. We need to take a closer and more informed look at the practices and meanings of secularism in the public culture of independent India.

The dominant interpretation of secularism in India did not entail the removal of religion from the political sphere, but rather the belief that religion and culture were elevated to an ostensibly apolitical level, above the profanities of the political. This institutionalized notion of culture and religion as apolitical, and the derived notion of selfless “social work” as ennobling and purifying by virtue of its elevation above politics and money, provided an unassailable moral high ground to a certain genre of “antipolitical activism,” conspicuous among social and
cultural organizations but also often invoked in agitations and in electoral politics in India. I submit that it was from this discursive field of “antipolitics” and “religious activism” that the Hindu nationalist movement, with great ingenuity, built its campaigns and organizational networks for decades. Like other forms of cultural nationalism, the Hindu nationalist movement always entertained a complex ambivalence vis-à-vis democracy and apprehension toward the “political vocation.” The evolution of the movement, its organization, and its political strategies must be understood in the context of a constant negotiation and oscillation across the deep bifurcation in modern Indian political culture between a realm of “sublime” culture and a realm of “profane” competitive politics.

Historically, the contestation of symbols, space, and numbers between Muslim and Hindu organizations was admittedly central to the broader evolution of nationalism and nation-states in the subcontinent. In India, sedimented fears of the abstract and generalized “Muslim” remain today the decisive ideological bedrock of the Hindu nationalist movement, and the most persistent source of its popular and electoral success. There is little doubt that communal subjectivities, especially the fear of Muslims among Hindus, have acquired a certain solidity and “truth” that is independent of social experiences or physical proximities. These subjectivities exists as what Slavoj Žižek calls “ideological fantasies,” that is, a kind of knowledge of the other that appears as more true than any appearance or concrete representation, and is thus a construction beyond argument or falsification.

Hindu nationalism is not an antiwestern religious “fundamentalism.” What Hindu nationalists desire is recognition of themselves and India by the western powers, but a recognition through assertion of cultural difference and assertion of India’s sovereignty and self-determination. The so-called “consumer goods revolution” in India in the 1980s, the spread of satellite TV, and India’s entanglement in global economic and cultural flows made the question of India’s place in the global order one of crucial importance. Within a decade, these changes transformed the face of many Indian cities, as advertising, fancy shops, new cars, televised soap operas, luxury goods, and a still more visible youth culture proliferated. To sections of the Hindu nationalist movement this “invasion” signifies a national crisis and a surrender of the national pride or, in the suggestive language of a Hindu nationalist activist, “our motherland, bereft of moral fibre and vulnerable to the rape of western capital and consumerism.” Other sections of the movement acknowledge the powerful attractions of “western consumerism” and modern technology, and emphasize that India has to develop a strong public morality that could contain hedonistic excesses.
They argue that the prerequisite for developing such a sovereign national modernity is the cultural unity and purity of the Hindu nation. In these ideological fantasies at the heart of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Indian Muslims represent a constitutive defect, an impurity that has to be “cleansed” before India can emerge as a modern self-conscious nation.

I hope to show that the emergence of a mass movement of this magnitude is probably one of the least “natural” processes one can imagine. The Hindu nationalist movement neither expresses essential cultural differences nor merely reflects new social and religious practices in India. It has emerged out of a conjunction of massive and protracted labor of organization and ideological promulgation, the existence of a certain receptivity and disgruntlement in broad social milieus, and the presence of certain strategic conditions of possibility in the political field. I will, in other words, try to understand the precarious and contingent processes through which the dispersed grievances and sentiments in various parts of Indian society were reframed by the Hindu nationalist discourse, organized by its movements and party, and hence aggregated into what appeared to be, and indeed was staged as, a spontaneous surge of social or cultural identity in public arenas.

In this book I try to avoid the language of “cultural aggregation” that dominates much of the discussion of politics and identity in contemporary India. Journalists, social scientists, and political strategists and activists alike seem to buy into a shared paradigm of the primacy of caste in formation of political loyalties, and unreflected assumptions about caste and religion as originary identities prevail. The extensive use of mythico-historical inventories of symbols and narratives in politics and the public culture of India is routinely taken as an index of the existence of the subjectivities and memories they in fact seek to shape.

We need to question such assumptions as, for instance, that public manifestations of the “Hindu community” by the Hindu nationalist movement, or votes cast for the BJP, necessarily reflect deep cultural logics and continuities; or that the language of caste and community always strikes a receptive chord among the Indians, supposedly deeply immersed in their cultural ontology. These phenomena must instead be studied in the context of the specific “economy of stances” in the public arenas in which they seek to intervene. We need to recognize that the field of politics always produces and modifies social or cultural dynamics and identifications in a specific form, that is, in specific discursive modalities and within specific stratagems of the field. To understand the broader “culturalization” of the political field in India, and the surge of Hindu nationalism more specifically, we need to frame it within an anthropology of the political field. We need to analyze the
idioms, practices, and stakes that define political practices in their
everyday localized forms in mohallas (neighborhoods) and villages, in
the constant disjunctures between fractured subjectivities and the prag-
matism that political discourse engenders among so-called ordinary
people, as well as the ideological fantasies and rationalities at play
among the accomplished specialists in political strategy and practice.

In this book, I try to carry out at least parts of this research program,
although I probably lapse back into more conventional modes of thinking
about, and knowing about, both politics and culture. I hope, none-
theless, to be able to suggest a few modes of inquiry that could contrib-
ute to a more differentiated anthropology of the political field in India.

About This Book

This book grows out of an engagement with the phenomenon of Hindu
nationalism since 1990. Throughout this period I have tried to make the
“saffron wave” in India intelligible within a broader theoretical and
historical perspective. But I have also, during longer periods of field-
work in the state of Maharashtra, tried to understand the specific ways
in which Hindu nationalism has been represented and received in the
context of social conditions and public contestations in both rural and
urban localities in that state. I wanted to know to which extent Hindu
nationalist discourse and organizations had been able to reshape and
homogenize local grievances into communal subjectivities underpin-
ning the overall Hindu nationalist project. The enormous diversity of
India obviously makes it impossible to generalize too heavily from this
material. Throughout the following text I only offer a number of brief
vignettes presenting ethnographic material collected in Maharashtra
between 1991 and 1997, in order to illustrate how existing complexities
of power and contestations in neighborhoods and villages decisively
shaped the receptivity toward the discourse of Hindu nationalism.

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The most important and unfailing support has, however, come from my wife Kirsten, and my children Lærke and Malte, who with understanding and love have tolerated my long periods of physical absence and absentmindedness.
Through all the richness and diversity of public life in contemporary India there traverses one remarkably coherent narrative: declining standards in the realm of politics and public administration. Corruption, declining quality of leadership, shameless display of self-interest by groups and individuals, violence, and lethargy in administration and the judiciary are phenomena routinely explained by the invasion of politics into all spheres of life. The national press debates how the independence of the judiciary and the administrative capacity of the state are threatened by “political interference” in court cases and in administrative routines. In urban neighborhoods, mob violence or demands for ever new “donations” to school boards and building societies are explained as the effect of “someone playing politics.” In villages, the routine selection of some farmers rather than others as eligible for new credits, or the stalled construction of an irrigation scheme, is attributed to the machinations of local political entrepreneurs.

Bemoaning the “signs of the times” has probably always been a way of coping with a changing world, just as blaming politicians for virtually any social problem seems to be a regular feature of the very form of democratic representation. Yet we need to note that this critique of “politics” and “the political” in contemporary Indian public life hardly means that political life is ignored. On the contrary, political scandals, conspiracy theories, rumors, and gossip about political leaders constitute an inexhaustible reservoir of fascination and discussion. More importantly, notions of rights and entitlements of groups and individuals vis-à-vis the state proliferate in ever more assertive forms. This is true of the fuzzy zone of clientelist practices and informal organizations through which large numbers of rural poor and slum dwellers are linked with formal institutions of the state, as well as in the realm of more organized “civic,” cultural, and political activism. Older notions of “civility,” of adherence to procedures and “proper conduct” in electoral politics and in everyday routines of institutions and associations seem to have given way to what appears as a cruder, more direct, and often embarrassingly shameless desire for power, office, money, and recognition.
Within the social worlds of the urban middle classes in India, this apparent erosion of the civility of public culture is routinely attributed to the rise of “unworthy” (read: plebeian) leaders, to contamination of cultural values, to the free reign of material desires in modern urban life, and so on. However, the more brutal languages of politics also flourish at the heart of the middle-class world, for instance when broader anxieties regarding the encroachment of the poor and the plebeians upon so-called “respectable” society are translated into discourses on the “right of the majority,” antiminority xenophobia, and fantasies of an authoritarian state and strong leadership. Since the early 1990s, the telephone surveys frequently carried out by various English-language weeklies in India regarding political preferences and attitudes to political issues have shown that the predominantly middle-class respondents (that is, those who own a telephone) have grown increasingly skeptical toward the viability of democracy and more inclined toward stronger and more authoritarian forms of governance.

It is the basic contention of this book that the phenomenal growth and political success of Hindu nationalism in India in the last decade must be understood in the context of this larger disjuncture between democratic mobilization and democratic governance. This is a disjuncture that, needless to say, has deep roots in the structure of colonial and postcolonial governance and in the specific “production of the Indian people,” that is, the production of political identities and collectivities in both colonial and independent India. In the following chapters I analyze how Hindu nationalist discourses and organizations emerged in the late colonial period; how they were transformed by new institutional structures and new political imaginaries in independent India; and what conditions of possibilities enabled the Hindu nationalist movement to grow rapidly from the late 1980s. However, such a history of the evolution of political imaginaries in modern India does not offer itself to us in a single line of development, or in its own terms. To write such a history requires a certain theoretical vocabulary and a certain interpretative grid.

The most difficult question is how we can develop an understanding of the social and cultural construction of politics in India that does not reduce it to something else. How can we avoid reducing politics to a mere reflection of the dynamics of the caste system, as much political analysis in India today seems to be doing—assuming, just like earlier forms of class analysis, that the political field is simply a mirror of society, a screen from which the intentions and strategies of elusive “social forces” can be read? How can we avoid the other extreme, the conventional political science interpretation of electoral processes,
institutional dynamics of bureaucracy, and strategies of aggregated political actors as if they constituted a world of their own, disentangled from the complex embedding of politics in a wider field of social and cultural practices?

To my mind a promising starting point is a radical reading of de Tocqueville’s basic idea that democracy is not merely a set of institutions and procedures for governance but must be understood as the political institution of a process of questioning and subversion of social hierarchies and certitudes that over time produces an altogether different society. Such an interpretation of de Tocqueville entails the view that circulation of democratic discourses, and expansion of practices of democracy, first and foremost reveal the constructed and provisional character of the social world. In this reading, “the political” denotes a generative and destructive process, questioning hierarchies and certitudes, while producing undecidability, as it reveals that every institutionalized and ostensibly naturalized practice is founded on acts of power and decision.1 To study politics is, in my view, to study how “the political”—the irreducible conflicts and undecidability lying at the heart of the social world—is brought under control and temporarily institutionalized within institutions, procedures, legislation, and so on.

This perspective endorses Foucauldian insights regarding governance as a set of practices of classification and ordering of social practices wider than those directives that flow from the state. At the same time, it tries to combine these insights with a dynamic understanding of how rights, entitlements, and administrative categories are distributed and “inhabited” in surprising and not always governable forms. The problem in a strictly Foucauldian notion of governmentality is, to my mind, that it tends to reify the pervasiveness of the power it depicts, blinding itself to internal inconsistencies and contradictions of governing rationalities and thus relegating resistances and contestations of technocratic rationalities and forms of governance to the margins of society, that is, to more inchoate forms of insubordination and defiance. The entire realm of political passions, of ideologies, of the role of the imaginary elements of politics and the de facto incoherence and impotence of many forms of governance slips out of the picture if we do not take “the political” seriously: the fundamentally undecidable, incomplete, and contested nature of facts and descriptions of society, of categories, of identities, and so on. We need, in other words, to recognize that the very reason why discourses of order and technologies of government try to fix and authorize certain forms of knowledge and certain taxonomies is that these schemes are fundamentally inadequate and impossible. They can never fully create the effects and the order
they aim at. Similarly, identity claims and identity strategies have to be constantly reformulated because they never fully produce the categories, groups, or individuals they claim to represent.

Ordinary existence in a modern and democratic society in many ways produces an excess of meaning, a chaotic and amorphous array of phenomena and discrepant experiences that open a large number of interpretative possibilities. This larger society is, in crucial ways, experienced and continuously imagined through its representation in the field of politics—in utterances of leaders, symbols of state and nation, political spectacles, and in the microphysics of institutions. Needless to say, democratic political procedures, constant debates and circulation of competing truths, and open and formalized contest for office and authority present deeply polyvalent and partial re-presentations of the social world. They thus present society to itself in a disenchanted, changeable, and almost profane fashion. At the same time, projects of order, promises of stability, narratives of community and identity are also presented and produced in this world of democratic politics—not uncommonly by presenting themselves as “beyond politics,” as justified by technical expert knowledge, “history,” or community, and thus appearing as “decidable,” fixed, and beyond questioning.

When cultural identities are articulated and mobilized in the realm of democratic politics, as in the case of Hindu nationalism in India, it does not happen as a mere transfer and transmutation of already existing cultural identities into a profane and instrumentalist world of politics. My argument is that the articulation of Hindutva (Hinduness) in politics and in public life is primarily a way of making sense of the social world, a strategy that aims at creating a certain order within the dis-orderly realm of democratic politics, by imposing a matrix of a natural, eternal, and essentialized “Hindu culture” upon it.

The main argument of this book is that the success of the Hindu nationalist movement in Indian society has to do with the specific ways in which historically produced notions of “Hinduness” were packaged and recirculated at a particular juncture in the development of democracy and modern governance in India. This juncture was also characterized by an intensified democratic revolution, that is, a process of intensified politicization of everyday life, where by many Indians experienced a large gap between a generalized sense of the undecidable character of the social worlds they lived in and an inadequate and even threatening representation of this world in an intensely competitive and pervasive form of mass politics in the country.

In the following, I give a condensed outline of what this “radical” Tocquevillean thesis of the democratic revolution implies for the study of identities, discourse, and more institutionalized politics. Second, I
interpret the political history of India since the end of the nineteenth century through this theoretical lens. I do so by exploring how colonial categories of governance shaped cultural-national identities and how the politics of representation in the political institutions of the colonial state conditioned the development of ethnoreligious identities. I then explore the production of national citizens and cultural communities by the postcolonial state and probe into the effects of universal franchise, secular institutions, and the new developmental governmental-ity of the Indian state.

The Democratic Revolution

In his work on the democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville defined the democratic revolution as the process through which all the founding elements of premodern societies—divine legitimization of power, the naturalness of hierarchy, the fatalism of the masses—gradually came to be questioned and undermined by the new revolutionary creed of democracy: the belief in freedom and equality as universal values (de Tocqueville 1966, 49).

With reference to the possible democratization of European societies, de Tocqueville asked: what are the effects on politics, morality, governance, and social cohesion when a society, dominated by multiple relations of inequality, adopts a democratic system of government and universal suffrage? What happens when free institutions, public opinion, and a measure of procedural regularity of decision making develop? De Tocqueville suggested that democratization produced a society “without foundations,” that is, without stable legitimacy and knowledge. In the absence of earlier ontological certainties of divinely authorized knowledge and temporal power, democracy created a range of new ideological forms, such as an abstract civic ethos and national loyalty, both possible and necessary (ibid., 535–47).

De Tocqueville explored the master-slave dialectic to show the new instability that was generated by diffusion of the notion of equality and what we today would call the “nonfoundational” character of democratic society. In principle, democracy dissolved the difference between master and servant. They were both citizens of the country and both human beings. The relation was no longer one of uncontested power on part of the master and unconditional obedience on part of the servant. Old obligations and rules were gone or not adhered to, and new ones had not been fully formed. This undecidable moment, when the old relation was subverted and the new one not yet established, generally characterizes democratic societies: “Obedience, then, loses its
moral basis in the eyes of him who obeys; he no longer considers it as some sort of divinely appointed duty, and he does not yet see its purely human aspect; in his eyes it is neither sacred nor just and he submits to it as a degrading though useful fact. . . . There is an unspoken intestinal war between permanently suspicious rival powers. . . . The lines between authority and tyranny, liberty and license and right and might seem to them so jumbled and confused that no one knows exactly what he is, what he can do, and what he should do” (ibid., 554).

This may be read as a parable of modern mass politics premised upon the fundamental split between power and legitimacy. The democratic revolution irreversibly blocked the possibility of power ever being legitimate, as in a premodern age, that is, successfully representing itself as a divinely sanctioned, self-evident general interest embodying the unity of society and defining its boundaries. A new form of secular power now came into being, derived from “the people” which, however, remained abstract and unrepresentable, as observed by Lefort: “The locus of power becomes an empty place. It cannot be occupied—it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it—and it cannot be represented. Only the mechanisms of exercise of power are visible, or only the men, the mere mortals, who hold political authority” (Lefort 1988, 17). This engendered, in turn, a new imagination of society, no longer based on an uncontested authority but fragmented and traversed by a fundamental undecidability regarding the foundations and legitimacy of power. The paradox of democracy is that although broad legitimacy becomes ever more impossible to achieve in an ever more differentiated and fragmented society, strategies of legitimization of power nevertheless attain paramount importance. Modern political strategies and discourses may all be seen as attempts to bridge this gap between legitimacy and power by invoking discourses on order, security, justice, freedom, and equality.2

Nineteenth-century modernity and capitalism in Europe transformed social structures and forms of state. Older hierarchies, orders, and truths collapsed and rendered the domain of “the political”—the undecidable objects of open contestation between antagonistic groups and world views—an ever larger and more central field. This gave, according to Lefort, birth to a distinct “culture of questioning”: “In my view the important point is that democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of markers of certainty. . . . [W]ithout the actors being aware of it a process of questioning is implicit in social practice, that no one has the answer to the questions that arise, and that the work of ideology, which is always dedicated to the task of restoring certainty, cannot put an end to this practice” (Lefort 1988, 19). Out of this grew all the central ideological configurations of modernity.
circling around, and straddling, narratives of loss (of truth, certainty, culture, faith, authenticity), and equally persistent quests for recuperation of the lost in new purified forms.

Social Antagonisms and Politics

One of the sometimes overlooked consequences of the birth and dispersion of this new and abstract discourse on equality, freedom, and sovereignty is that it made a more radical and generalized form of social conflict possible. As Laclau and Mouffe have noted, even the most exploitative form of inequality does not necessarily carry the seed of resistance and conflict within its own logic. There might be what I would call “distributional fights” regarding the relative positions, duties, and obligations within a system of subordination, but something more is needed to construct inequality as the result of malign oppression. Historically this “something more” was exactly what Laclau and Mouffe have termed “the democratic imaginary”: “the discursive conditions which made it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression. Here lay the profound subversive power of the democratic discourse, which would allow the spread of equality and liberty into increasingly wider domains and therefore act as a fermenting agent upon the different forms of struggle against subordination” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 155).

The entire modern discourse of abstract individuals endowed with equal rights and desires, and the universalized notion of “Man,” made it possible to perceive inequality within a radically new horizon, now in terms of an antagonism that constructed the superordinates as preventing the subordinated from fully realizing what they actually were, or ought to become. Social differences, however objectified, cannot in themselves explain why some rather than other identities/differences become loci of organization and political identification. In order to recognize itself, to speak of itself—or to recognize itself when it is spoken for—a collectivity must be defined by what it is not, and why it is not what it desires to become. The formation of political identities does not, in other words, merely take place through the deployment of categories of governance, registration, and classification, but through the contingent inhabitation of these “identity slots” by individuals and collectivities. Needless to say, this inhabitation is precarious and unstable, and always presupposes an active and protracted labor of ideological articulation.
Social antagonism may be thought of in a Lacanian sense as a fundamental ontological principle of undecidability and contingency, a constitutive negativity that prevents the full ordering of the social fields, and a kind of intrinsic split which is the resistance and limit that any structure or institution encounters in the process of its making and reproduction (Laclau 1990, 18). Antagonism is thus not simply the symmetrical opposite of order or structure—like, for example, ambiguity or randomness—but something preventing this order, a constant source of instability and incompleteness.4

To my mind, the concept of social antagonism marks a significant advance in a poststructuralist understanding of “the political” compared with Foucault’s more restricted privileging of the epistemological production and authorization of the social world and its governance. To Foucault, “the political” was played out in two ways: either as intrabureaucratic contestations and strategies involved in selecting and authorizing certain methods and technologies of government and production of knowledge; or as dispersed, partial, and uncoordinated forms of plebeian resistance or defiance on the part of those subjected to the modern disciplinary regime.5 Because Foucault largely regarded scientific discourses as effective, expansive, and encompassing technologies of governance, able to produce a large range of (intended) effects and capable of technocratic “depoliticizing” of contentious issues, and because he remained unclear on the issue of strategies (except as an attribution of “strategies” to certain patterned effects after the fact), he literally pushed “the political” to the margins of society. Politics became in a sense something external, an outer limit to be overcome, represented as a residue of the not yet fully governed individual or as fragments of a residual and heroic self—that undefinable residue evading epistemic domination and governance.6

The real merit of the notion of social antagonism is that it reintroduces “the political” into the heart of social practices, and points to the ultimate impossibility of fully functional institutions and fully fledged identities—not because of any external resistance or resentment, but because of the flaws inherent in the governing discourses: the inherent contradictions and destructive character of capitalist production, the flaws and incompleteness of taxonomic schemes of classification incapable of comprehending the richness of natural or social life, the incapacity of any narration of the self and the collective to disclose fully the identity it purports to portray.

In this reading of the Tocquevilleian perspective, discourses of democracy and equality and the political imaginaries they historically gave birth to were crucial in the shaping of modernity. They not only