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Special Independence Day Issue:
What is Indian?

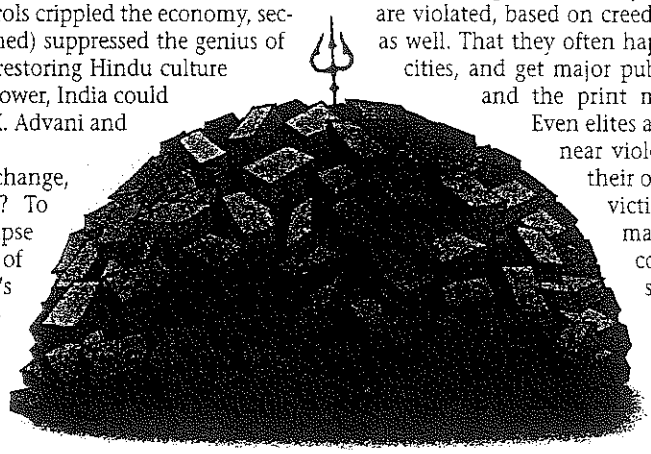
Visualising Politics

By ARVIND RAJAGOPAL

ALONGSIDE liberalisation and market-oriented reforms, during the '80s and early '90s, India witnessed unprecedented levels of political mobilisation and communal violence. What is the significance of this violence? Does it mean that economic liberalisation and political violence have been so intertwined? Nehruvian secularism, sacrosanct for decades, has been vilified. If with globalisation, the Indian state has tacitly withdrawn its guarantee of equal protection to all citizens, what is its new equation with the people?

The Nehruvian state exercised controls over the economy on behalf of Indian society as a whole. A regime of economic austerity made it more plausible that the poor too could eventually prosper. Secularism was its culture, that is, neutrality with respect to the different communities. With liberalisation, these efforts have been attacked as a failure.

With liberalisation, elites nurtured by decades of state subsidies have rejected the Nehruvian social compact. The cultural counterpart to this attack is Hindu nationalism. Just as state controls crippled the economy, secularism (its critics claimed) suppressed the genius of Indian civilisation. By restoring Hindu culture to its rightful place of power, India could become great again, L.K. Advani and others argued.



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But amidst so much change, what place of power? To understand this, a glimpse of the different stages of Hindu nationalism's growth is useful. Initially there were organisations like the Arya Samaj, that were social reformist and anti-colonial. As Hindutva developed through the RSS, issues of social reform were left behind. The RSS subordinated itself to the Congress as a social and political force, but without entirely identifying with it. After independence, the RSS focused on cultivating its cadre, with only faint hopes of capturing state power. After the Emergency, however, and the taste of power in the Janata government, this changed. Using Hindu ritual and symbols, the RSS began to stage new public spectacles where religious and cultural issues acquired a political identity.

The 'media publics' created in the process are designed to generate cultural influence, but not for devotional or social reform purposes. Rather, they signal the growth of an emergent governmental form, of authoritarian populism. Popular consent is critical here, not as a sign of democracy but of party might.

During the rise of Hindutva, its critics usually aimed at the state, assuming that Hindutva was mainly a law and order problem. But Hindu nationalism succeeded by locating itself in the private, not the public sphere. It is defined in cultural terms, and consumed through spectacular images and brands. This illuminates why the politics of identity has now become so important.

Earlier, Indian nationalism was based on identifying with a secular, developmental state. At present, however, the state inspires no trust. Nor does the economy provoke optimism. National sentiment is therefore expressed chiefly in hostile forms. What it wants for modern India, besides being against its "enemies", is less clear. That is the crisis of Indian nationalism now. Violence is the expression of this crisis. It is an announcement that the state will not protect all citizens at all times. Not that it had ever done so. For instance, the poor have always had a different dispensation, more arbitrary and unfair, and less protected. What is new is the spectacular ways in which people's rights are violated, based on creed or caste, and social class as well. That they often happen in the metropolitan cities, and get major publicity through television and the print media, is not accidental. Even elites are thereby reminded how near violence is, and how large is their own privilege. Not only do victims get a lesson, others may realise that this fate could be theirs too. This signals the more "risk-sensitive" environment of privatisation and liberalisation.

When extraordinary levels of violence are systematically inflicted on the same people, it makes them more visible, where previously they were not noticed. This is the most important effect of riots. "We" now notice Muslims as Muslims rather than as ordinary persons. The implied demand is to cease being visible as Muslims, and to renounce evidence of their religious identity, at the risk of more violence.

Hindutva is no viable basis for nation-building. As even the BJP now tacitly acknowledges, nation is coalition. But a coalition is more than a consortium in pursuit of power. It requires the willingness to examine ourselves and come to terms with our doings. Until then, the past is a powderkeg waiting to explode. ❁

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