

# The Crisis of Secularism in India

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## The Gujarat Experiment and Hindu National Realism

Lessons for Secularism

Who could digest the “poison” of the Gujarat elections without inviting instant death? According to then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Bharatiya Janata Party alone, like Lord Shiva, could partake of the venom, digest it, and remain alive (The Hindu, December 25, 2002). In this extraordinary image, Vajpayee may have been referring to the party’s electoral invulnerability, such that even the gruesome violence on and after February 27, 2002, at Godhra could not affect the BJP’s chances of victory despite all the charges of political connivance. Far from expressing regret at the death and destruction, Vajpayee appeared to be boasting of the aura it created around the party, which had made it more godlike and fearsome.

Part of the dismay following the BJP’s victory in the state assembly elections in Gujarat in 2002 was that despite extensive media coverage of the violence against Muslims, the party connected with the violence, namely, the BJP, won comfortably.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, violence was almost exclusively limited to constituencies where the Congress had posed a threat to the BJP in the past, in North and Central Gujarat. The BJP won fifty-two of sixty-five seats in these regions, far more than elsewhere in the state. If there were any doubt of the link between the BJP’s victory and the violence, a poll conducted by the Centre for the Study of Develop-

ing Societies clarified the matter. In its survey of voters, 55 percent of Hindu respondents (73 percent of those who responded to the question) agreed that the post-Godhra riots were “necessary to teach a lesson to anti-national elements” (that is, Muslims). While this category includes a larger proportion of BJP voters, it should be noted that 47 percent of Congress voters (69 percent of Congress voters who responded to this question) also agreed with this endorsement of violence (Y. Yadav, “Patterns and Lessons,” 12).

Was it the case with Gujarat that reports of violence against Muslims conveyed to many voters merely the justifiable response of a party avenging Godhra? Many anecdotal accounts did indicate that Godhra provoked a demand for revenge. Does this imply that modernization and the growth of communications has finally promoted a realist mode of perception, with the masses attributing the causes of collective action to objective events recorded in television and print news? Posing the question thus underlines the transparency accorded to publicity, and the self-evident status ascribed to facts. It is true that discussions of political news tend to be dominated by a realist frame of perception and by what Ernst Bloch has defined as “the cult of the instantly ascertainable fact” (34). Yet publicity does not produce transparency; facts are neither self-evident nor instantly ascertainable. Vajpayee’s words, presented above, confirm that a naïve realism is inadequate to understand Hindutva. Certainly we did not notice a collective inclination toward realism when it came to assessing, say, claims about Ram Janmabhumi, polygamous Muslim men, or “pseudo-secular” politics. The response to Godhra was indeed rationalized as a reaction to the perceived reality of an incendiary Muslim mob and what it wrought. But it does not follow that this rationalization was itself justified.

Many have assumed otherwise. One columnist wrote that the images of burnt bogies and charred bodies, beamed through the evening of February 27 and the morning after, “made it real.” When it became known that twenty-six women and ten children were included among the dead, what followed was inevitable, he said, explaining that the mobs included large numbers of new middle classes with television sets (Prem Shankar Jha). This appeal to the realism of the televisual medium, by a reluctant critic of the BJP, acknowledged in an apologetic fashion the unsustainability of older fictions that, presumably, the older middle classes could have been relied on to keep, through their more old-fashioned and implicitly more tolerant codes of conduct.

We can tentatively call the form of realism being invoked here Hindu

national realism, not to identify a *fait accompli* by any means, but rather to underline the fact that it is not by brute power alone that Hindutva works. A political project like the BJP's is not confined to politics narrowly understood but is world-making in its aims and seeks to shape the forms of knowledge emerging along with it. Modes of perception and terms of understanding corresponding to them are created, implausible to the skeptical, no doubt, but providing a self-confirming universe to others. My purpose in this essay is to locate points of contradiction in this project and to ask how secularism, with its own more sober and distinguished truth claims, could have allowed this alternative form of realism to grow with so little hindrance.

In this respect, talking about Gujarat to people who do not identify themselves in one way or another as either a supporter or an opponent of any political party has been interesting. Chatting with an undergraduate of Gujarati origin, active in organizing South Asians for a South Asian studies program on the NYU campus, I asked what people had been saying about recent events in Gujarat. She had just told me that nearly half the students of South Asian origin were Gujarati, so I assumed there must have been some mention of the riots. She looked blank. What events? she asked. There were many people killed, I said, not wanting to say too much. There was an earthquake in Gujarat two years ago, she said, trying to guess what I might have in mind. We raised some money for it, she added. This conversation occurred some months after Godhra but in the midst of national debates on the Gujarat elections. Although the massacres that had recently occurred were extensively televised, my query evoked no recognition.

It was tempting to dismiss this as the response of an uninformed youth to a vague question. I was reminded of it a few days later when speaking on the telephone to an elderly relative in India, S. An invalid who spent her evenings in front of the television, she had always impressed people with her recall of events, public and private. See what they've done—they've come into a temple and killed people, she said, referring to the attack at Akshardham temple in September 2002. But this is because of all the killings that just happened, I replied. What killings? she asked, sounding perplexed. All the killings that happened earlier this year, when many people died, I said. She remained confused. There was an earthquake sometime ago, she said, implying that was what I must be referring to. S. had not voted for decades and took mainly a dramaturgical interest in party politics.

I don't think her failure to remember was deliberate. Violence committed by so-called Hindus did not seem to register as violence. Neither of the per-

sons I spoke to seemed to recognize Hindu aggression; both referred instead to the earthquake, invoking a metaphoric Richter scale of destruction and tectonic shift.

Somewhat similar accounts emerged from Gujarat itself. A human rights lawyer who investigated the Gujarat killings reported that, when she asked schoolchildren what happened in the year 2002, they replied, "Godhra." Asked what else happened, the children said, "Akshardham." Pressed to indicate if anything else happened, they mentioned terrorism, implicitly of Muslim origin, in other places. Only on further coaxing did they allude to violence against Muslims, dismissing it as a reactive episode.<sup>2</sup>

The accounts reported here are neither specifically religious nor political. They cannot be ascribed to ignorance in any simple sense either. News about Gujarat was abundant, but absorption of their import was contingent on prevailing frames of understanding. To invoke media bias as an explanation is also unsatisfactory. The little available analysis of news coverage about Gujarat does not point to any obvious pro-BJP tilt. Thus, for instance, the Editors' Guild Report has concluded, after a survey of news coverage on Gujarat, that "barring some notable offenders, especially Sandesh and Gujarat Samachar and certain local cable channels," the news media played an exemplary role (Editors' Guild, 28). Siddharth Varadarajan has gone further, to say that the news media were critical in bringing the violence to an end, and that it would have gone on for longer if not for press and TV coverage. Perhaps we still have much to learn about the structures of popular perception and cannot assume the self-evident power of a realist sensibility.

If the Hindu tele-epics mark a moment in recent history when a significant shift occurred in the culture, away from secularism and toward a more Hinduized polity, Godhra, I suggest, signals another important movement in the same direction, one that can be understood in terms of the bases of truth claims made, and their relation to the perceptible world. The tele-epics broadcast on Doordarshan beginning in 1987, and becoming a staple of television culture thereafter, invoked a mythic idea of history and the sense of a lost utopia, against an unspoken conception of the present. Competing ideas about the world did not, therefore, have to be reconciled in the reception of these serials; they could coexist jointly in the appreciation of narratives whose precise status as fact or fiction was not relevant. Godhra, however, dramatically brought Hindutva's mythic world of marauding Muslims and helpless Hindus into the templates of reality television and live action news.

## Secularism in India and an Epistemological Break

Announcements of the crisis of secularism tend to swell and subside with the advance or retreat of specific political parties. The Congress Party used to be and once again has become identified as the bulwark of secularism. When its complicity with communal violence and Hindutva was revealed, for example, in the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, or in the demolition of Babri Masjid, misguided leaders, whether Indira and Rajiv Gandhi or Narasimha Rao, were blamed. Party identity became the sanctioned way of tracking the issue, collapsing questions of what parties actually were and what they claimed to be.

Crucially, there was a recognition that secularism was a state-led exercise and that for all its aberrations (aberrations in the practice of secularism, and in the functioning of ruling parties), it was necessary to preserve the idea of the Centre as capable of being neutral and secular. It was this necessity that underlay the practice of tracking politics via a relatively facile understanding of party identity. What this led to, however, was the assumption that the party in power occupied a politically neutral ground. Even with the BJP, some critics sought to preserve this fiction. Thus the apparent reluctance of Hindu nationalists to attack secularism itself, and their readiness to smear “pseudo-secularists” instead, was held to indicate a residual Nehruvian reticence on their part, and even a tacit affinity with secularism. To be sure, when challenged on the matter, Hindu nationalists claimed to be more secular than secularists themselves. But the incoherence of this claim when taken together with the insistence on Hindu dominance indicated an expedient polymorphism rather than a covert Nehruvianism.

When the BJP came to lead the ruling coalition, the limits of such a tautological mode of reasoning became more obvious than before. For example, although the Congress opposed the BJP, the limits of its capacity to advance a secular agenda were more than evident. And the unexpected victory of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance in May 2004 over the BJP and its coalition persuaded few people that the victory was motivated chiefly by secular forces. Without engaging with the reasons why secularism shifted from its cultural and political eminence, and, instead, asserting simply that it ought to retain its place of pride, we may fail to realize that the entire field or basis of reference may have shifted, while defending something that has accrued a set of meanings unrecognized in our own debates. My discussion here is therefore in the spirit of a secular critique of secularism, an attempt to acknowledge the inevi-

table myth-making accompanying a state ideology such as secularism (Navaro-Yashin), and to inquire into its own complicity in the crisis of secularism.

Arguments about secularism in India usually place themselves within larger debates in philosophy or political theory, to the exclusion of a more historical or sociological treatment. I will say more about the reticence of advocates about the social bases of secularism below. Suffice it to note here that their arguments have focused on the relationship between religion and politics and the capacity of the state to effectively separate the two. Categorical terms such as “religion” and “the state” have dominated these discussions, provoking a prescriptive mode of writing, with arguments about what the state ought or ought not to do. Approaching the subject by considering situated forms of knowledge leads to the terrain of society, meant to be affected by secular policy. A more descriptive approach is thereby enabled, and this is helpful, since how communal and secular politics unfold is not predictable in advance but requires investigation.

There is perhaps good reason why society as a category has been scarce in debates on secularism. Even at the time of the Constituent Assembly debates, religion was understood to permeate the lives of South Asians to such an extent that it became the operative term policymakers considered; modern society, *gesellschaft*, was a precarious achievement at best (see, for example, Ambedkar’s defense of the need to reform personal laws, *Constituent Assembly Debates* [1946–1950], vol. 7, 781). Secularism was therefore preeminently a domain of prescription, of determining how best to create a nation where religious influence was minimized. As a result, secularism was an expert matter, adjudicated by professionals on a case-by-case basis, with the treatment differing according to whether the issue was political elections, religious groups, government quotas (for jobs or for educational institutions), and so on (Galanter, “Hinduism, Secularism and the Indian Judiciary”). But the debate on secularism experienced an epistemological break when it shifted from being an expert to a political matter: the mechanisms by which the object of knowledge called secularism was produced changed (Althusser and Balibar).<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s, the question of secularism came to be seen as an all-or-nothing issue (see U. Baxi, “The Struggle for Redefinition”). Specifically, it became a question of national identity.

This is not to say that national identity was absent or unimportant before. What the surfacing of national identity as a problem indicated rather was that its earlier form came to be questioned. To the extent that a secular nationalism

was earlier preponderant, we can say that the identity corresponding to it came under attack. More precisely, there had not been a concerted attempt to challenge it before. When competing ways of seeing the world gained valence, secular nationalism was revealed to be underelaborated as a theory and under-represented as an identity. It is possible that the kinds of innocence or ignorance cited above were prevalent before. Under a Hindu nationalist hegemony, they clearly take on a different significance, however, and lend themselves as elements authorizing a specific horizon of interpretation, one that we have called Hindu national realism.

Secularism for its part had sought to establish and sanction its own world-view, of course, one that clearly came into crisis. We can locate the first major moment of this crisis in the post-independence period not with Shah Bano or the opening or the destruction of Babri Masjid, but earlier, during the Emergency of 1975–77. Secularism, together with socialism, became the watchwords of Indira Gandhi's government at this time, and were used to identify enemies of the state, of whom there were many. Both terms were undefined, so it was left to the ruling party to determine who was not secular, and who was not socialist. To quote Rajeev Dhavan, "It cannot be overlooked that 'secularism' and 'socialism' were the major ideological weapons of the Emergency. It is quite clear that the pathological practice of the Emergency lay in using these values in order to silence criticism and control the opposition. For, who is to be the judge of what constitutes the essence of a 'religion,' a scientific temper or a superstitious belief?" (10).

If then, secularism had been, among other things, a tool of sovereign power to consolidate itself, after the Emergency, both ruling and opposition parties increasingly distanced themselves from its use regardless of who was in power.<sup>4</sup> There developed a reaction against the emblems of the Emergency, and an increasing reliance on religious identity as a tool for getting votes. The releasing of popular democratic forces during the opposition to the Emergency, together with the expansion of the means of communication, led over time to a realignment of national affairs, bringing it in a somewhat closer relation to ground-level politics.

The importance of the RSS and its affiliates in the politics of the Emergency often tends to be overlooked. It needs to be marked because it helps to place Hindu nationalism in a wider historical process rather than in a timeless world of fanaticism. With the opposition leaders in jail (and a section of the parliamentary left supporting the Emergency), the RSS was probably the

largest grassroots organization in north India, and it seized the opportunity of becoming the voice of the underground, with the blessings of J. P. Narayan. From being a deeply self-absorbed organization focused mainly on character-building, the RSS began to experience the possibility of harnessing itself to popular energies and acquiring political power. The victory of the Janata Party in 1977 was a victory for the RSS as well, and its members acquired important cabinet posts for the first time. It was from here on that a sustained process of experimentation in the use of religious ritual and symbolism in popular mobilization began, leading to the Ganga Jal yatra in 1983, and the Ram Janmabhumi Andolan thereafter. Previously, the RSS had itself been abstemious in its use of prevailing Hindu practice, fearing that the choice of any one symbol could alienate those who favored different deities or other modes of worship. Hence it had invented a new symbol, the saffron flag, which for the RSS represented the "living god" of the Hindu nation. More broadly, Hindu nationalists began to cultivate new strategies of communication as shortcuts to power, departing from the predominantly cultural role the RSS had till then mainly focused on. Instead it began to carve pathways into the political process itself, albeit in the guise of a religious movement (Rajagopal, "The Sangh's Role in the Emergency").

What I want to emphasize here is the importance of the media in enacting what I am calling an epistemological break in the career of Indian secularism. A limited, top-down, and adjudicatory debate on secularism became transformed into a question of national identity. This development made it impossible to address the issue as before, on a negotiated and pragmatic basis. Instead secularism was rendered into an all-or-nothing matter, conflated with Indian society as a whole. Once this shift occurred, the battle was already lost, at least for the moment. For the matter was plain: few could claim to lead secular lives, or, for that matter, wished to.

### Parallel Worlds in a Split Public

The introduction of television provided the technical means for thinking the nation as a unified entity across a public divided by barriers of language, literacy, and region (with nationwide broadcasting beginning in 1982) and helped precipitate identitarian modes of addressing national questions (such as of secularism). The decision to televise Hindu epics proffered a narrative basis for imagining this unification. It was not surprising that Hindu nationalism was the most effective at making political capital out of this oppor-

tunity and mobilizing national sentiment on the ground. Here the incapacity of secularism as a political force was revealed. Except for a well-educated minority, secularism could not provide an efficacious identity in the contests that ensued. The socially dominant portion of this minority was English-educated, for whom class and cultural privilege were intertwined with secular identity in ways that were difficult to disentangle. As a symptom of the kinds of problems involved here, we can recall that "secularism" was itself an English word, for which no proper South Asian equivalent existed (P. Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," 350–51). If secularists could often not distinguish between challenges to their politics and resentment of their cultural privilege, it was because political form and cultural privilege appeared as one.

One reporter's account on a visit to Gujarat after the riots provides an interesting example of the difficulties of engaging across linguistic and cultural divides. The columnist Tavleen Singh, when chatting with some young men at a teashop in Mogri, found that their support for Narendra Modi was quite open; for instance, they told her that if the Congress was in power, half of them would be in jail since Narendra Modi could not protect them. She then asked if they thought the massacres of Muslims and the rape of young girls in Ahmedabad had been a good thing. They replied "with angry unanimity and conviction" that there had been no rapes except in Godhra, where twenty women, according to the Gujarati newspapers, had been raped. Tavleen Singh told them that this was incorrect, and that *Sandesh* and *Gujarat Samachar* had published denials. With more anger, the young men—of whom there were thirty or forty—said, "It is the English newspapers that tell lies." As Singh insistently carried on a debate with them, the men launched into an attack against the English press that was "so angry and so aggressive that it seemed that there could be more violence," and so she left.

Tavleen Singh does not explore this incident further. It is worth asking why, for the young men, no defense was considered necessary when it came to Gujarati newspapers, even when they contradicted *Hindutva* claims. Similarly, it is striking that for Tavleen Singh, the charge that English newspapers tell lies is worth repeating only as a portrait of a communal mindset. The accusation itself is so uninteresting that no rebuttal is required. It was these men, and those like them, who were under investigation; to turn the telescope around was not required.

Here we can glimpse not only the mythic world of Hindu national realism but the parallel universe of secular realism, in an event that, despite a serious

attempt at investigative journalism, appears like a missed encounter. One way to initiate a description of it is to indicate the material bases through which secular realism is constituted, in the means of its mediation. It is appropriate that the example chosen features a print journalist, because print news culture is indeed a privileged orbit of these parallel worlds. Print helps reinforce particular forms of knowledge without disclosing the identity of those who gain most by upholding these forms of knowledge, and its public is bounded by shared recognition of a given language. We can locate Nehruvian secularism here, at the level of sociolinguistic practice, in its adherents' ability to switch between different linguistic codes and registers, specifically between English as a language of command, and indigenous languages. Performative competence in elaborated codes of the English language appears as the public secret of secular realism. That secularism was identified with English-language speakers was known to all, but it could not be admitted by English-language users themselves, since this would obviously compromise the position from which they defended secularism, as well as secularism itself.

What did it mean for secularists to uphold realism in a society where realist narrative tropes were evident mainly in their scarcity, where the achievement of realism proceeded unevenly and contradictorily in a nationalist project that worked through a public split by language, caste, and creed? How did realism operate across a language divide when it was always seen to be anchored in the perceptual "neutrality" and objectivity of the English-language news culture, and this news culture in its turn based its authority on a state whose neutrality was hardly a general assumption? Seen from the side of indigenous languages, it could be argued, as it has been argued, by Hindu nationalism, that the state was never neutral but passed from one form of colonialism, British-led, to another, led by a technocratic English-speaking elite. Sober realism was hardly adequate to capture the registers of responses to this new and perhaps unforeseen marginalization, that is, the cultural invisibility of the Indian-language intelligentsia despite its history of being at the forefront of the anticolonial struggle, and the demographic majority it stood for, vis-à-vis English-language speakers in India.

The realist epistemology of the English-language elite often appeared like a relatively painless achievement because inherited from elsewhere. To establish and inscribe a realist aesthetics for an Indian-language audience and simultaneously to dethrone this sensibility as it currently existed in the English-language press (which provided the access route to the English-language

elite), to institute a different mode of realist perception—this can be described very briefly as part of the Hindu nationalist project, although to state it in this summary fashion is already to give it a coherence that such a mammoth undertaking cannot possibly possess.

A member of a major “western Indian” newspaper family described the problem to Robin Jeffrey thus: “You have to articulate the spirit of the people. . . . [English-language newspapers] want to project an image of liberalism. Now liberalism is fine, but when the majority of the population is Hindu, you have to take that thing into consideration too” (294).<sup>5</sup> His placement of liberalism within English-language papers, and his implication that the majority Hindu population would prefer Indian-language newspapers, unless the English press altered its political philosophy, is noteworthy.

Jeffrey’s important work on Indian-language newspapers provides insights into their institutional culture. He discusses *Gujarat Samachar* and *Sandesh*, leading Gujarati-language papers that were both cited by the Editors’ Guild for inflammatory coverage, reported to be bitter rivals constantly seeking to undermine each other. The following quote from *Gujarat Samachar* in 1999 gives some flavor of the character not only of their rivalry but as well of their reportage: “Taking refuge in thuggery and blackmail, Falgunbhai [the owner of *Sandesh*] is flailing to save disintegrating *Sandesh*.” *Samachar* was accusing *Sandesh* of punishing the director of a theatrical play for refusing to purchase advertising space on its paper, by attempting to have the play banned for obscenity. On the next day, *Sandesh* retorted: “Anyone can use bazaar language and obscene words, but readers buy a paper to read the news. They are not interested in the war of words of the owners of the papers” (*Gujarat Samachar*, February 3, 1999, 12, and *Sandesh*, February 4, 1999, 16; cited in Jeffrey, 137).

There is no disguising the competition between the papers; on the contrary, it is dramatized for the reader’s pleasure. Here is a clue to an important difference in news culture. Politics is not separated from news through the same kinds of conventions that operate in English-language news; indeed, in this example, it permeates the writing. Even while acknowledging that “the news” is not supposed to contain “bazaar language and obscene words,” the editors themselves duke it out before their readers, although in a distinct editorial way.

The writers’ tone here is personalized and vindictive, even libelous. There is no pretense at impartiality; rather, each interlocutor adopts a lofty moral attitude while accusing the other of immoral and/or illegal behavior. There

is no insulation of professional authority that editors can take comfort in. Honesty and decency rather than objectivity and neutrality are the expressed norms of journalistic conduct here. As such, their appeals to their readers are couched in deeply personal protestations about character and reputation, and assumptions about the regulatory and normalizing force of the law are conspicuously absent. Rather, their debate is conceived as one where the participants must themselves compensate for the underpoliced space they work in, with a strength of character that is, inevitably, wanting. The divided character of the news-reading public expresses more than a translation gap. They exist in different cultural worlds and partake of distinct ways of perceiving newsworthiness. They are aware of each other, but as can be expected, it is the culturally and politically subordinate world of Indian-language news that has a much keener sense of its hegemon than vice versa. This much is well known. What is not sufficiently appreciated, however, is that, when communication is known not to be neutral or transparent in specific and structured ways, it also becomes available for political exploitation. This became clear during the Gujarat elections, through reports that were, however, little noticed by commentators.

### Manifestos and Their Manifestations in the Gujarat Election Campaign

Election manifestos may be an increasingly hollow ritual, but as statements meant to embody party principles they can still be revealing, sometimes in ways that the parties themselves do not intend. Owing to the intensive media scrutiny during the Gujarat election, a few specific stories about the way the campaigns took on a different shape according to their audience made it into the English-language papers. For instance, the Congress was revealed to have different manifestos in English and in Gujarati. The English-language manifesto demanded “a white paper on the Godhra episode” and espoused the values of secularism against “narrow-minded communalism” at some length. It condemned communal violence, blamed the state government and the chief minister, Narendra Modi, for it, and expressed concern for the consequences of violence on minorities. It described the assembly election as a battle for the soul of India, between the “forces of narrow-minded communalism” and the “forces of secularism.” Secularism, according to it, was the “bedrock of our nationhood” and the election was about the “preservation of a heritage to which all communities of India have contributed.” The Congress, it



claimed, was the inheritor of Mohandas Gandhi's mantle and the BJP that of his assassins.<sup>6</sup>

The party's Gujarati manifesto, however, although seven pages longer than the English-language manifesto, could still find no room to mention secularism or Indian nationhood, or even to criticize the BJP. It spoke, instead, of a battle between "humanity and demons" which if anything echoed BJP anti-Muslim rhetoric. It attributed unemployment and poverty in Gujarat, somewhat vaguely, to manmade calamities and riots without distinguishing between these events (Ghatwai).

Kamal Nath, who was the All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary for Gujarat, sought to clarify the matter. The Sabarkantha MP Madhusudan Mistry, who had undertaken the rendition into Gujarati, had been hard pressed for time, and this had resulted in errors in translation, Kamal Nath said ("VHP: We'll Repeat our Gujarat Experiment," *Indian Express*, September 4, 2002). It was more likely that the party was ensuring errors in translation, based on the systematic gaps between its English- and Gujarati-language practices. These differences corresponded to its national and state-level activities respectively. Arguments about secularism and about minority victims could be made by national leaders like Sonia Gandhi. At the state level, things were not the same.

The Congress Party candidate contesting Narendra Modi's seat in Maninagar was Yatin Oza, who had been a BJP MLA for two terms. In interviews given during the December 2002 election campaign, the BJP's inability to build a Ram temple at Ayodhya was Oza's most often repeated example of that party's untrustworthiness. The Congress in Gujarat was headed, of course, by Shankarsinh Vaghela, an old RSS man and a former colleague of Narendra Modi. The major election platform of the Congress was cow protection, a staple of Hindu orthodoxy. To ensure that its image was unsullied, the Congress did very little relief work among riot victims; Congress MLAs visited relief camps in secret on the rare occasions they did pay any attention to them. Further, the Congress fielded almost exclusively Hindu candidates, and nominated only four Muslims, of whom at least two contested for seats the Congress did not expect to win. The BJP manifesto, for its part, made no mention of Godhra and its aftermath and focused instead on "security." It offered proposals to launch an antiterrorist movement by training youth and forming village-based cells in coordination with the defense ministry. It also promised an anticonversion law in Gujarat, and regulation of education in the state's

madrasas, in addition to "good" administration, or as proof of it ("Two Manifestos: Congress Explains It as Translation Faux Pas," *Express News Service*, December 1, 2002). When a reporter asked Narendra Modi, at a press conference releasing the manifesto, why the document contained no reference to Godhra and the violence, Modi was provoked. "No political party causes riots," he said angrily. "How can a party commit itself to cause riots in its manifesto! We are here to ensure safety," he said. But the audiovisual presentation that preceded Modi's press conference began with his favorite Gaurav Yatra phrase—"merchants of death" ("Godhra, Hide and Seek: In Gujarat, A BJP-style Manifesto, A VHP-style Campaign. What Next?" *Indian Express*, December 3, 2003). Meanwhile, the election campaign itself, managed by the VHP, was more explicit. Pictures of burning bogeys of the Sabarmati Express were displayed on election posters and cut-outs, T-shirts and CDs, and a videotape was produced showing Narendra Modi coming to the help of victims at Godhra and at Akshradham ("Shy of 'G' Word, BJP Seeks Votes," *Express News Service*, December 2, 2002). VHP pamphlets circulated in middle-class colonies in Gujarat, dismissing the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity as maligning Hinduism, with statements like "What is your security even in the most decent and secure locality in spite of having security guards? Traitors and terrorists are coming by the truckloads. They will kill your security guards and enter your bungalows. They will murder you in your drawing rooms and bedrooms." Middle-class fears of the majority poor, rising from their single-room hovels and shanties, blur with fears of "Muslim terrorists." Certainly there was nothing specifically Muslim about the threat, nor anything Hindu about vulnerability described here. The pamphlets also promised a "50 per cent tax saving" for contributions to the VHP (Bunsha, 4).

## Conclusion

National Human Rights Commission Chairman J. S. Verma, speaking to Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee, asked him to translate his rhetoric on religious intolerance into action and pointed out that those affected by the violence in Gujarat could not return to their homes and had lost large numbers of their kith and kin. "How is it different from war?" the former chief justice of the Supreme Court asked ("Match Words with Action, NHRC tells PM," *Times of India*, August 4, 2002).

J. S. Verma, as chief justice, was the author of the landmark judgment in 1996 where he ruled that Hindutva was a way of life, and as such could not be



construed as a partisan appeal to religious identity. Hence, according to the court, the Shiv Sena had not violated campaign rules in the elections following the demolition of Babri Masjid and the tumultuous violence that rocked Bombay thereafter. Within a few years he was confronting the party that incubated Hindutva, in another state, and another assembly election, where the violence preceding the campaign had escalated beyond almost anything seen in post-independence India.

As Verma implied, there was something about the violence in Gujarat in 2002 that made it qualitatively different. Justice Verma offered a name for the events and, thus, a way of seeing them. The moral economy invoked was indeed not that of crime and punishment but of battling an enemy nation, and of giving no quarter lest one betray one's own country. All Muslims were, in this view, actual or potential agents of Pakistan, while Pakistan was a terrorist nation implacably hostile to India. Implicitly and explicitly, being Hindu is the condition of belonging in India and having one's rights protected.

In one of the most widely circulated remarks exemplifying such a view, the VHP international working president Ashok Singhal termed Gujarat a "successful experiment" that would be repeated all over India. "Godhra happened on February 27 and the next day, 50 lakh Hindus were on the streets. We were successful in our experiment of raising Hindu consciousness, which will be repeated all over the country now." Singhal also spoke glowingly of how whole villages had been "emptied of Islam," and how whole communities of Muslims had been dispatched to refugee camps. This was a victory for Hindu society, he added, a first for the religion. "People say I praise Gujarat. Yes I do," he told an appreciative but modest audience ("VHP: We'll Repeat Our Gujarat Experiment," *Indian Express*, September 4, 2002).

The announcement was a provocative one. Singhal not only refused to condemn the violence following Godhra but endorsed it. As a glimpse of an emergent political culture deeply dependent on the press and television, it challenged the deeply held assumption that the development of mass-mediated cultures in countries like India will repeat the historical experience of the West. Many commentators have appeared content to describe the resulting proliferation of identity politics and of mass manipulation as a degeneration from the idealized forms of high bourgeois society. But in India, the newspaper-reading public is actually expanding, even while the television audience is growing.<sup>7</sup> Tensions across a linguistically split reading public are thereby subject to a new level of socio-technical mediation, one that can cut across divisions

imposed by print literacy with sound and image. Television news channels were aggressive in their attempt to publicize the riots in Gujarat, as is well-known. However, it was through the filter of the print media that its effects were perceived, namely, as the bias of English language media. The politics of religious identity could be shifted onto linguistic identity, in a displacement that I suggest reflects the salience not only of media but more broadly of a history whose differences cannot be reduced to factors of religion or of communalism.

Very briefly, the historical crisis of experience in the West, as registered, for example, in art and literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the decentering of the subject of knowledge, occurs subsequent to the formation of national cultures. The political reverberations of this crisis are thus more contained, and mediated, for example, through technocratic debates on objectivity and neutrality as codes of conduct for professionals, and through debates on attention and attention-management as a new locus for securing the idea of a self-sufficient, knowing subject (Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*). In countries like India, however, this crisis occurs while nation building is still an incomplete task and therefore causes debates on the sociology and politics of knowledge to blur into larger debates and struggles over the nation. For historical reasons, religion becomes a medium for these conflicts accompanying nation building; in India this is certainly influenced by British colonial historiography and accompanying mechanisms of colonial rule. The overdetermined character of these developments is required to be confronted in any engagement with Hindutva.

## Notes

1. In the December 2002 elections, the BJP retained power in a state it had ruled for ten years, despite a regional split in the party (with Shankarsinh Vaghela's breakaway group) and the Congress's own split with the National Congress Party. The party had experienced a series of defeats in panchayat and municipality elections in the previous three years, and the prospect of retaining power was uncertain. Despite its orchestration of the most extensive communal violence since independence, and an economy in serious disarray, the BJP eventually won 120 seats, against 50 won by its chief opponent, the Congress.
2. Sunita Narula (staff member, Human Rights Watch), presentation at American Studies panel on Gujarat, New York University, February 26, 2003.
3. The term "epistemological break" was introduced by Gaston Bachelard and utilized thereafter by others, most notably Louis Althusser. Althusser used the term to mark the shift from Marx's humanist and "pre-scientific" phase to the latter's more properly

scientific theorizing of the economy. Here I am not retaining Althusser's teleological vector in my use of the term.

4. The disproportionate targeting of Muslims in sterilization and in slum demolition campaigns certainly qualified the Emergency's claims of secularism.
5. I am grateful to Robin Jeffrey for making this paper available to me.
6. I am grateful to Anjali Mody for pointing me to the *Indian Express* reports on the same subject.
7. Thus, estimated television viewers have increased from 150 million in 1990 to 270 million in 1995 and 448 million in 1998 (sources: *Mass Media in India*, 1991 [New Delhi: Publications Division, 1991], 266; *Mass Media in India*, 1994–95, 186; *Mass Media in India*, 1998–99, 207; *Press and Advertisers' Yearbook*, 1996–97 [New Delhi: INFA, 1996], 403c, 415c; all cited in Jeffrey 283). For the same years, the circulation of daily newspapers has increased from 22 million to 35.3 million to 59.2 million; estimated readers would be about five times the circulation figure (sources: *Press in India* [New Delhi: Registrar of Newspapers for India]; *Statistical Outline of India*, 2000–2001 [Mumbai: Tata Services, 2000], 29; all cited in Jeffrey, 284).