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Ramrajya Ki Aur

Abstract
Extract:
Since 1991, India has been energetically following economic formulae of deregulation, trade liberalization, and privatization in the hope of generating an economic 'miracle' and in theory at least, of liberating two hundred million beings from abject poverty. During this same period, and as these economic changes wring their effects on Indian lifestyles, the Hindutva movement has also been energetic in its espousal of change, calling for a return to 'Hindu values and traditions' which historically have been inhibited by Muslim and British rule and more recently by globalization processes.

Keywords
economics, Hinduism, Indian society, spirtualism, international relations

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Ramrajya Ki Aur[1]

by Maggie Grey

> To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages. God created man to work for his food, and said that those who ate without work were thieves (M. K. Gandhi, *Young India* 1919-22).

> Man makes religion, religion does not make man ... It is the fantastic realization of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore mediately the fight against the other world, of which religion is the spiritual aroma [Karl Marx, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. 1844].

Since 1991, India has been energetically following economic formulae of deregulation, trade liberalization, and privatization in the hope of generating an economic 'miracle' and in theory at least, of liberating two hundred million beings from abject poverty. During this same period, and as these economic changes wring their effects on Indian lifestyles, the Hindutva movement has also been energetic in its espousal of change, calling for a return to 'Hindu values and traditions' which historically have been inhibited by Muslim and British rule and more recently by globalization processes. The Hindutva movement too promises a 'miracle': the re-establishment of *Ramrajya* or that mythologized golden era under the kingship of Lord Rama of Ayodhya.[2] Though India is popularly perceived as a land of true believers, these new 20th century miracles, whether they are to be wrought by economic rationalism or divine guidance, must be among the most unlikely that the faithful have conceived.

India is by constitution, secular: "WE THE PEOPLE OF INDIA having solemnly resolved to constitute a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC ...". India by tradition however is a site of the most ostentatious religious celebration: from the small-poster devas whose scarlets and golds gleam behind the dusty files of all public sector desks; to the welcoming divinities who fly across shop hoardings dispensing golden coins; to the full

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[1] 'Towards Ramrajya'. Maggie Grey lectures in South Asian and Middle Eastern International Relations at Bond University.

[2] The dates of Ramrajya are obscure but the *Ramayana* was first written down by the poet Valmiki in the third century BCE; by this time the Golden Age was dissolving into the mists.

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breasted apsaras who ply the national highways from their gaudy perches atop the long-distance trucks; there are three hundred and thirty million gods in India and a secular India looks rather like an oxymoron.

States generally refer to "the separation of religion from politics, and the attenuation of community-based political identities"[3] as the acme of secular responsibility, preferring to ignore perhaps more rigorous expectations of the secular state. Article 15 of the Indian Constitution provides that the "state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them". As defined by the Oxford Dictionary however, secularism is: 'the doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state.' According to such a formulation, secularism's real concern should be with the ethics of the state, its social responsibilities and duties rather than the beliefs of its citizens, and the problem for the secularizing state should be to decide on which model of social well-being and which sources of social theory it will depend for inspiration. For India approaching 1947, this was a difficult decision for its traditional model of social well-being was a highly structured class (*varna*) system, status in which was determined by *karma* or the accumulated merit of past (not present) lives. Belief in a future state was also important to Hindus who believed that as their good deeds multiplied and their karma improved so would the socio-economic and spiritual status of their future lives. If it was to fulfil its Congress-determined secular mandate, the state had to reconcile this model with its projection of India as the vanguard of newly emerging states.

Traditionally, Hindu social theory argues that there are four social ends or goals which may be pursued: *dharma* or virtue through the performance of righteous duty; *artha* or material wealth; *kama* or physical pleasure and *moksha* or spiritual liberation. Dharma has always been the dominant concept as it is most relevant to the welfare of the entire society: the word comes from the root *dhr*, "to sustain" and implies that dutiful and virtuous behaviour sustains the world. One of the most significant duties of a king was to ensure the stratified behaviour of each class and thus to protect society from political instability and chaos.

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[3] Prakash V. Upadhyaya, 'The Politics of Indian Secularism' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1992, p.817.

The four classes which stratify Indian society were 'ordained' by the sacred text, the Rg Veda (composed 1200-900BCE), and later texts make it clear that to contravene the specific duties of class (*Varnashrama Dharma*) is to commit a sacrilege. The fuller theoretical exposition of dharma and class occurred in a number of texts written between 500BCE and 500CE including the *Dharma Sastras* or Sacred Law, *Manu Smrti* or Laws of Manu and the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*). These texts codified dharma as the prescribed duties, functions and privileges of the four classes or varnas: brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra. The duty of the brahmin was essentially to study, to teach and to perform religious acts; that of the kshatriya to govern and protect the society; that of the vaisya to conduct trade and commerce, and that of the sudra to serve (without resentment) the other three classes. Indian society has also been stratified by a complex caste (jati) system wherein caste is "a hereditary endogamous and normally a localised group, having a traditional association with an occupation".[4] As each caste and sub-caste stands in an historical relation to thousands of other castes, this has produced social networks whose complexity resembles the maze of illicit cables which currently halo the streets of the major Indian cities.

Though Varnashrama Dharma or the duties of class certainly limited social mobility, class stratification was not as rigid as many Westerners believe for, as Pye notes, another major characteristic of Indian polity was the separation of social status from political and economic power.[5] In all societies wealth and political power naturally bestow prestige, however Indian society reserved the highest prestige for status achieved through spiritual effort and ritual purity. The ubiquitous "poor Brahmin" of popular folklore had in some respects vastly more prestige than a lakhpati (millionaire) or even a kshatriya king.[6]

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[4] A. R. Gupta, *Caste Hierachy and Social Change: A Study of Myth and Reality*. Jyotsna Prakashan, New Delhi 1984, p. 27.

[5] Lucien W. Pye, 'The South Asian Subcontinent: Hindu and Muslim Power and the Rewards of Narcissism', in *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*. Harvard University Press, Massachussetts, 1985, p. 136.

[6] The Brahmin's ritual and spiritual power was essential to the running of the state; at the highest levels his participation in and blessing of all major state functions and processes were required; even at the village level, no normal project (from schooling to the building of a new house) would progress without the participation of a Brahmin. This meant that the Brahmin class was consulted in regard to almost all ventures, large or small. According to de Bary "Even from the point of view of civil law, the brahman

Furthermore, the king was also bound by dharma and had to fulfil certain duties in order to maintain his spiritual power; without the blessings and support of Brahmins, the king would lack political legitimacy. Pye argues that this duality of power has authorized contradiction and ambiguity in Indian society. Hindus would argue that contradiction and ambiguity are inherent to all human society and that trying to construct a single hierarchy of power is a futile effort; there will always be power which adheres to the spiritual and intellectual; to the heroic or the political; to the accumulation of wealth, and to strength and endurance: these are the qualities signified by varna and the four classes, they cannot be simplified. As a result however of the competitive nature of spiritual, political and economic power, Indians today are as likely to derive moral authority from the lips of an ash-smeared saddhu squatting beside the Ganges as from any formal, institutionalized system.

Modern India's struggle to reconcile theories of moral and political authority began well before the Independence movement promised any institutionalization of change. During the 19th century, activists used scriptures as a source of legitimacy from which to enthuse Hindus with a new national, culturally appropriate identity. While some activists and groups, particularly the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj, chose to confront class and caste issues directly, most chose to ignore them. The centrist Congress Party did so by focussing its energies on the Independence movement while Hindu Rightist groups chose to construct an exclusive Hindu identity which challenged Muslim identity and supported traditional class and caste divisions.[7]

Bal Gangadur Tilak (1856-1920) dismissed traditional interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita[8] and argued that Krishna consciousness as expounded in the Gita

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enjoyed certain privileges. In connection with [a] treasure trove for instance, the Manu Smrti lays down (8.37) that if a brahman finds it he may keep the whole of it "for he is master of everything", while persons belonging to other classes cannot do so" (W. T. de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vols. 1 & 2, Columbia University Press, USA, 1958. p.220). It is also the case that the most heinous crime was the murder of a Brahmin.

[7] Generally these 'anti-secular' communal movements failed to participate in the nationalist struggle against British occupation.

[8] For example Shankara's view that its central message was renunciation and Ramanuja's that it was *bhakti* or devotion. Shankara was a 9th century ascetic and intellectual who expounded the doctrine of advaita monism: that the individual soul is an identical form of the universal soul and that consciousness of this arises from study and disciplined self-knowledge. Ramanuja, a 12th century philosopher,

to Arjuna, was essentially single-minded political activism. Tilak stressed an ideology of social action and involvement to avoid the tradition of renunciation and anti-materialism (primarily the model propagated by Gandhi) which he felt had led inevitably to the political domination of Hindus. Tilak's arguments however were made within the very limited context of resistance to British rule; they were not intended to, nor did they, arouse mass political activism against traditional social relations.

Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) reinterpreted Shankara's doctrine of *advaita monism* by identifying the universal soul with the nation and claiming that just as the individual soul seeks submergence in the universal, so national salvation would arise from the submerging of individual souls (*jivas)* into the life of the nation. He identified the nation with the divine goddess *Bharat Mata* claiming that "Nationalism is a religion that has come from God".[9] Sri Aurobindo also argued that one class in particular, the kshatriya, would be useful in reconstructing the state.

> We should have the bow of the Kshatriya ready for use, though in the background. Politics is especially the business of the Kshatriya, and without Kshatriya strength at its back, all political struggle is unavailing.[10]

As suggested by Aurobindo, physical force or violence may be necessary in political struggle, but that force would be at the behest of the kshatriya class against an alien military and political presence.[11] There was no question of course of a kshatriya-inspired class revolution, this class being among the most wealthy and privileged in India.

Gradually small institutions propounding a revivalist Hinduism nationalized. The Arya Samaj, the most popular movement, sought to reform the caste system and to abolish a range of Hindu practices including the ritual power of the brahmin, *sati* or the immolation of widows; child marriage and the worship of

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identified the universal soul with Vishnu whose chief attribute was intelligence and taught that devotion to Vishnu was the path to truth.

[9] W. K. Anderson & S. D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, USA Westview Press, 1987, p.15.

[10] Aurobindo Ghose from 'The Doctrine of Passive Resistance' in W. T. de Barry, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol.2. 1958, p.174.

[11] A century later, the Bharatiya Janata Party want however to generalize kshatriya duty beyond class, inciting people of all classes to assume the role of guardianship of the Motherland.

idols. The Samaj wanted to establish Hindu unity on the basis of religious and social unity; hopefully in the process converting Muslims and elevating low caste Hindus. It declared that it

> repudiates caste by birth; it condemns the numerous subdivisions into which Hindu society has been split ... by reason of castes and sub-castes; it considers the artificial barriers which caste in India has created to divide men from their fellow-men as pernicious and harmful.[12]

A similar group, the Brahmo Samaj also argued for absolute social equality:

> When will those pernicious distinctions which are sapping the very life-blood of our nation be at an end and India rise as a strong unified nation to fulfil the high destiny which Providence has ordained for her? There cannot be a surer truth than this ... that high destiny cannot be fulfilled without the utter destruction of the supreme root of all our social ills - the caste system.[13]

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), the quintessential human rights activist, did not challenge the basic concepts of Varnashrama Dharma; rather he saw the four classes as reflecting the natural social order and wished only that class communities would follow their dharma more rigorously.

> The four divisions, Brahmin, Kshattriya, Vaishya, Shudra, define a man's calling; they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. The divisions define duties; they confer no privileges. It is, I hold, against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate to oneself a higher status, or assign to another a lower status. All are born to serve God's creation - a Brahmin with his knowledge, a Kshattriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability, and a Shudra with his bodily labor.[14]

For Gandhi, the major social problem was not with these four classes but with the fifth: Untouchability. Thought to be the social stratum originally allotted to indigenous communities by the Aryan Hindus when they first arrived in the subcontinent (and to lower castes which fell further from grace), untouchability became a rigid distinction of humiliation and separateness. As performers of impure acts, such as working with leather, disposing of the dead (both human and animal) and removing garbage and bodily wastes, untouchables were deemed so polluting that their very shadow could pollute others. To borrow

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[12] Cited in K. K. Datta, 'Social Changes in Twentieth Century India', in G. S. Metraux & F. Crouzet (eds.) *The New Asia: Readings in the History of Mankind.* Mentor Books, USA, 1965, p.222.

[13] *ibid.*

[14] M.K. Gandhi 'Hinduism', in H. A. Jack (ed.), *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of his Life and Writings*. Indiana University Press, USA, 1956, p.168-9.

Thomas Hobbes' phrase, they lived lives which were unrelentingly "nasty, brutish and short".

As rigorously as he challenged the British occupation, Gandhi also challenged untouchability. In 1932, while in Yeravda Prison, he endured a "fast unto death" as a challenge to the government decision to have separate electorates for Hindus and Untouchables. Gandhi was successful (against the wishes of the leading Untouchable, Dr B. R. Ambedkar) and the Yeravda Pact, agreed to by the British after six days of the well-publicised fast, stated that "No one shall be regarded as untouchable by reason of his birth ...".[15] Of course untouchability remained, but it was no longer sanctioned by civil law and most intellectuals professed to believe that this and a policy of 'reservation' for educational, employment and state and federal parliamentary opportunities would eventually resolve the problem. As yet they have not, though they have improved it. Orthodox Hindus, correctly perceiving their own status to be jeopardized by the threatened dissolution of class and caste, continue to perpetuate social distinction and to frustrate moves towards social integration.

For many 'non-secular' Hindus, a focus on communal identity rather than class became a means to this end. Historically, although a formal conjunction between Hindu political and spiritual power remained during the Mughal and British eras, particularly in the Princely States, the diminution of that political power and the introduction of new social perspectives[16] weakened traditional links. It is also the case that the long-lived political and economic dominance by these two alien groups had highlighted Hinduism's insular view of social relationships by weakening the theory that social status was dependent on past lives lived in accord with Hindu precepts. Indian intellectuals were faced with an unwelcome choice. On the one hand was the proposition that the social tenets of Hinduism had only local rather than universal application. This was a humiliating conclusion implying Indian intellectual life was parochial and incapable of producing a spiritual vision for all humanity. On the other hand

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[15] Louis Fischer, 'Was the Mahatma's Torment Unnecessary?', in H. A. Jack (ed.), *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of his Life and Writings*. Indiana University Press, USA, 1956, p.296.

[16] Islam introduced the concept of absolute social equality while the British Raj perpetrated a variety of somewhat contradictory theories concerning social equality and the abhorrent nature of casteism and untouchability (despite clear racial inequality), as well as women's and neonate's rights (outlawing sati and infanticide).

was the proposition that political domination had been a punishment for having strayed from the righteous path. While Gandhi stoically accepted this proposition, believing that external rule was a punishment for the sin of having institutionalized untouchability,[17] most did not. A reading of Manusmrti however would have revealed the predictions that while Varnashrama Dharma was an expression of the natural social order, successive generations would debase it until it lost its original moral authority and mandate.

> In the other three ages, by reason of some kind of gain, dharma is deprived successively of one foot. On account of the prevalence of theft, falsehood, and deceitfulness, dharma disappears successively quarter by quarter.[18]

When Kali Yug or the Era of Kali (the present era) eventually arrived, according to Manu neither austerities nor sacred knowledge and sacrifices would serve to resolve the crisis.[19] Manu advises that "giving alone is the highest dharma in the Kali age".[20] "Giving alone" then might easily be interpreted in current politically correct dogma as welfare reform, though the BJP seems to have mandated an exclusive interpretation of scripture that is as notable for its lack of imagination as for its self-serving functions. Elite Indians seem generally to have avoided unpleasant reflection however and, jealous of their own socio-economic and spiritual status, conspired to inhibit public debate on all issues other than the communal.

By the early 1920s, exacerbated by the tensions of the Independence movement and prospects for a non-British raj, relations between Muslims and Hindus had deteriorated. Members of the Muslim *ulema* or clerical class began entering political life, and there was talk both of *jihad* and a pan-Islamic state. In view of their Muslim dominated history, many Hindus became convinced of a threat to their cultural integrity. Hindu-Muslim tensions heightened, communal violence became widespread and Hindu Revivalist groups multiplied. From this time onwards the debate over class and caste was further marginalized as politicians realized the greater rewards to be had by focussing concern on the greater

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[17] Gandhi, *op cit*. p.172.

[18] 'Dharma is not Static", from Manu Smrti [1.81-86] in W. T. de Barry, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol.2. 1958, pp. 218-9.

[19] Was he foretelling the current 'criminalization' of politics?

[20] Manu Smrti *op cit*.. p. 218.

communities of Hindu and Muslim, and in assuming, despite all social data to the contrary, a unity of purpose within these communities. Hindu activists therefore sought to establish national symbols and dogma where formerly local loyalties and legends were found; vote banks could not be allowed to degenerate into ever smaller divisions of class and occupation.[21]

Like Tilak, many of these revivalists argued that Gandhi's notion of *ahimsa* (non-violence) would destroy national pride and abet Muslims in their struggle for dominance. Eventually Gandhi's conciliatory approach to Muslims led to a breakaway movement from the Congress ... ultimately of course it led to his assassination in 1948 by a Brahmin member of the most prominent Hindu Revivalist movement, Nathuram Vinayak Godse, of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). According to his brother Gopal Godse:

> Our motive was not to achieve control of the government ... we were simply trying to rid the nation of someone who had done and was doing great harm to it. He had consistently insulted the Hindu nation and had weakened it by his doctrine of *ahimsa*. On his many fasts, he always attached all sorts of pro-Muslim conditions ... He never did anything about the Muslim fanatics. We wanted to show the Indians that there were Indians who would not suffer humiliation - that there were still men left among the Hindus.[22]

Immediately after the assassination, the RSS was banned, but managed to survive a clandestine existence until the ban was lifted in July 1949. In the 1990s, the RSS claims an active membership of one million Hindus and the ability to 'call on' a further five million former members.[23]

In 1923, the *Hindu Mahasabha,* a prominent Revivalist group, began in fact to promote *kshatriya* ideology through the formation of local gymnasia, where they trained both women and men for "militancy, vigour and domination".[24] A spokesman of the time argued that "We cannot afford to be so weak and imbecile as to encourage others to crush us, nor can we be so obsessed by the false ideas of *ahimsa* but at our peril."[25] Non-violence, he further argued would inculcate in

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[21] Muslims, alternatively, chose to establish a separate homeland.

[22] Cited in Anderson & Damle, *op cit.* pp.50-1.

[23] Since its inception in 1980, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and before that its predecessor the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, (inaugurated 1951), have recruited the great majority of their political cadres from the RSS.

[24] *ibid,* p29.

[25] *ibid.*

Hindus "laziness", "fake contentment", "cowardice", "lack of spirit" and a "slave mentality". Such groups failed to mention the corollary: that the Hindu system of social differentiation may have produced exactly these same phenomena.

At this time an influential book by V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (1924) argued the thesis that despite the multiplicity of exclusive racial, religious, linguistic and occupational groupings, Hindus were a "nation" wherein a Hindu was defined as

> a person who feels united by blood ties with all those whose ancestry can be traced to Hindu "antiquity", and who accepts India - from the Indus River in the north to the Indian Ocean - as his fatherland *(pitrubhu)*. In addition, a person is a Hindu only if he accepts India as a divine or holy land (*punyabhu*).[26]

Perceiving India to be threatened by the rise of a globally militant Islam; a hostile Pakistan and by communal violence in Kashmir and the Punjab; during the 1980s this concept of *Hindutva* was successfully revived and is now the dominant slogan of militant Hindus. Sarvarkar also expressed the need "to Hinduize politics and militarize Hinduism" and this message is again finding fertile ground. It is still however an exlusive communication: a warning to the elite to institutionalise privilege before the secular state mandates against it.

In Kali Yug, when relations are predicted by Manu to be at their most degenerate, it is surely permissable for Backward and Scheduled Castes to argue that the 'Hinduization of politics' should imply a more righteous and generous-hearted following of Varnashrama Dharma, even a restoration of Hinduism's golden or Krita age. As outlined by India's most eminent political scientist, Kautilya (c400-320BCE), in fact the duties of a 'golden' king (or prime minister) should focus on

> ... the affairs of the gods, hermitages, heretics, learned brahmans, cattle, and holy places as also those of minors, the aged, the sick, those in difficulty, the helpless and women - in the order of their enumeration or in accordance with the importance or the urgency of the affairs.

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[26] *ibid*, p.34.

> In the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king; in their welfare, his own welfare. The welfare of the king does not lie in the fulfillment of what is dear to him; whatever is dear to his subjects constitues his welfare.[27]

Happiness then might easily be interpreted as 'reservation', affirmative action and urban development. The fact that the 'militarization of Hinduism' might also be construed as a rallying call to the dispossessed to reconstruct the Krita Age has been ignored by the communal parties but not entirely overlooked by emerging militant protest groups such as the Naxalites, from the Backward and Scheduled Castes.[28]

While communal animosities and a general vagueness defines today's BJP party platform, its declared aim is to "break the mould of Nehruvian politics and to move the country away from the pseudo-secularism of the post-independent years".[29] Others have characterized its political agenda more succinctly as Bharatmata, Gangamata & Gomata.[30] In regard to class and caste issues the BJP has an inconsistent history and like the Congress Party, has generally inhibited their debate. Originally the Party argued for respect for traditional forms of social order including the strict hierarchy of caste but this has recently been officially abandoned in order to attract the Dalit and lower caste votes which comprise approximately 15% and 43.7% of the electorate respectively.[31] The party nevertheless is seen as having been generally formulated by and for *brahmins* and the urban petit bourgeois, protecting their cultural and economic interests primarily in the large towns and cities of the northern 'cow belt' or the most conservative and Hindi speaking states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan.

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[27] Kautilya, *Artha Sastra*, I.19, 'Duties of a King', in de Bary op. cit., p243.

[28] For a brief background to caste protest and violence see 'The Revolution against Caste', *Time*, April 13, 1992.

[29] L.K. Advani, BJP President, cited in D. Austin, & P. Lyon, 'The Bharatiya Janata Party of India', *Government & Opposition*, Winter, 1993, p.40.

[30] Invocatory titles to a divine maternity resident in India, the Ganges and cows.

[31] Formerly known as Untouchables, in the 1920s Gandhi coined the term Harijan (lit. children of God) as a more suitable class title for this lowest stratum of Indian society. The community eventually found the harijan term patronizing and chose instead Dalit or The Oppressed. The Indian government refers to them as Scheduled Castes. Statistics are from Ramesh Thakur, *The Government and Politics of India*. Macmillan, London, 1995, p.6. *Time* magazine on the other hand claims that Lower Castes form 52% of the electorate and Dalits 18%. 'The Revolution against Caste', *Time*, April 13, 1992, p.11.

For electoral reasons however it has been forced to expand this limited vote bank as it talks of the unity of all Hindus collectively working to establish a great international power; of an India which will achieve "the front rank of the international community". Issues intended to mobilise such unity include cow protection; the elevation of traditional *aryuvedic* medicine; a "no compromise" Pakistan policy; the decriminalization of politics, and moral governance leading to the eventual and ultimate establishment of *Ramrajya*.

The criminalization of politics in India has become endemic and until recently the BJP's 'pure' image encouraged many to believe that at least in terms of a clean government, Ramrajya might well be a possibility under such a party.

> Political meddling and pay-offs sapped the morale and effectiveness of civil administration, the police and the courts. *Goondas* - hoodlums - began to be used to organize votes, then to sieze control of voting booths. Some later became full-time politicians. Criminals in turn financed politicians, then entered politics themselves, and no policeman dared arrest them. This criminalization of politics gathered momentum in the 1980s, to the disgust of voters. Congress is the greatest culprit, though others are not far behind ... The police, says one former member of the Police Commission, now have four priorities: first to harass opposition politicians; second, to protect crooks in the ruling party; third, to stem terrorist activity and protect VIPs; last, to combat simple crime.[32]

Unfortunately 1996 proved the lie to this; the most recent *havala* or black-market allegations have implied the BJP President and other prominent members are equally 'polluted'. According to Lucien Pye however, Gandhi is at least partly to blame for this. He argues that while Gandhiji's struggles were made in good faith, they unwittingly encouraged dangerous new self-perceptions in the Hindu community which ultimately led to Indian politics being clad in a moral rhetoric devoid of action, and to a form of

> narcissism ... which had less to do with seeking to impose universal moral constraints on all citizens than with wanting to impress others with one's own superiority.[33]

Though it ignores two millennia of cultural history to accuse Gandhi of establishing the tradition of righteousness, in the 1990s the second accusation seems particularly apposite in regard to both the Hindu Right and the flagging

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[32] 'The Hindu Upsurge: The Road to Ayodhya', *The Economist*, February 1993, p.22.

[33] Lucien W. Pye, 'The South Asian Subcontinent: Hindu and Muslim Power and the Rewards of Narcissism', in *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*. Harvard University Press, Massachussetts, 1985, p.142.

Congress; and as we have seen in recent years, one of the added extras of assuming such a narcissistic posture is that it makes it so much easier to access large amounts of money.

When one examines both the support and oppositional base of the Party it is clear that, despite its avoidance of class or caste issues, the electorate nevertheless construes it in these terms. The very specific support base follows closely the RSS base and includes the elite castes plus limited communities of tradesmen and peasants; a section of the lower middle class, along with some dispossessed landed families, middle-class professionals and white collar workers. The oppositional base includes liberal and/or westernized intellectuals; Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsees, Jews, Tibetans and other religious minorities; militant Tamils; Dalits or Scheduled Castes and Tribes; rural masses or "Backward classes"; left-politicized industrial and agricultural workers and South Indians generally due to their better education, gender advances, Christian and socialist influences; a distrust of Brahminism and a general distrust of the north and the use of Hindi.[34]

The Hindu right however is not the only community to have manipulated social disadvantage to its own ends; the history of the Congress Party tells much the same story. From its inception, Congress, under the guidance of Nehru, used the notion of a new secular state as both a camouflage for existing social inequalities and an escape route from primitive beliefs and behaviours. As Mitra argues:

> ... Nehru, like the members of other modernising elites, had no inclination to give institutional shape to what he saw as a vestige of tradition destined to obliteration through the operation of the inexorable laws of history.[35]

Global perceptions too had some bearing on this: during the British Raj, India had been portrayed, in Upadhyaya's words, as "a communal museum, [and] incapable of ever governing itself as a nation through a secular and democratic system of representation".[36] For the Indian intellectual elite, while implicitly accepting the analysis of communalism and compartmentalization, it became

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[34] For a comprehensive discussion of both support and oppositional bases see Puri, above.

[35] Subrata, K. Mitra, 'Desecularizing the State: Religion and Politics in India after Independence', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.33, October 1991, p.756.

[36] Upadhyaya, *op cit.* p.816.

something of a challenge to disprove the prediction without significantly changing the status quo. India would achieve the front rank of nations but would do so by obscuring the issues of class and caste which so demarcated this nation from others.

> One lesson that they appear to have learned from the experience of their British masters was that while secular politics tended to bring the issue of class to the fore, politics organized in terms of caste and community successfully obscured it. It is possible to argue that those who led India's nationalist movement defined nationalism in non-secular terms so as to preserve and protect their own postion in Indian society.[37]

Though secularism became official Congress policy this was not a form of secularism which actively pursued a moral agenda based in "the well-being of mankind in the present life". Rather it was an elitist secularism which entertained itself with the vision of hundreds of millions of low caste individuals who, despite poverty, illiteracy, and the lack of any recognizable opportunities to improve their lot, would intuitively make the cognitive leap from a belief in the gods and divine justice to a super-rational understanding of 'underlying' socio-economic realities. It also pretended to believe that people whose limited socialization had taught them only of their own inferiority, could somehow challenge a hostile environment into resolving unequal relations of power, economics and prestige.

It did construct a state which outlawed Untouchability and caste discrimination in the public sphere, and which guaranteed increasing but insufficient opportunities to lower castes. In effect discrimination continued in the private sphere, and elite class and caste links have proved intransigent. The secularism of the Congress safeguarded religious belief and championed freedom of worship:

> . . .secularism in India does not mean anti-religion. It means equal respect for all religions, as much as for the religion of the majority as of the minorities, with full freeedom of worship and freedom of propagation for the individual[38]

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[37] Upadhyaya, *op cit.* p.816

[38] From the 1989 Congress Party Manifesto, cited in Mitra *op cit.* p.761.

Yet because of the idiosyncracies of the dominant schools of that 'religious' belief, this largely sustains the status quo of political, economic and social power. As Upadhyaya notes however:

> [w]hile there have always been those who were suspicious of majoritarian nationalism, the official variant of secularism it engendered is coming more and more to be recognized as a pendulum of opportunism, which swings in any direction, religious or secular, depending on the convenience of those it serves ... [39]

The Nehruvian dynasty served its founder rather too well in this regard; under both Indira and Rajiv, the construction of communal vote-banks became a major focus of Party activity. When Rajiv Gandhi began his second electoral campaign he too promised to establish Ramrajya.[40] Though his model no doubt differed from that of the BJP's, he recognized it as a potent symbol; whether he recognised it as the only valid political goal in the electoral campaign is not known.

Fortunately however political parties are not the only architects of public consciousness. As the electronic mass media extend their influence throughout India, they simultaneously extend new forms of self-consciousness and new images of both personal and collective identity. "Indian television is now the site of commercial exploitation as never before and consumer sovereignty is the guiding ethos".[41] Most popular amongst television programmes and video hiring, as well as the product of the world's largest cinema industry, is the Hindi movie and it is interesting to see how this contemporary cultural form conspires with governmental and communal forces to further obscure the class/caste debate.

Much of the attraction of Hindi movies is presumably the realm of absolute fantasy within which all characters emote and all plots devolve. At the core of this fantastic realm however is a rigidity of perception which serves to render one fantasy very much like every other while simultaneously avoiding most social realities. While suffering is certainly acknowledged, it is inevitably

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[39] Upadhyaya, *op cit.* p.820.

[40] *ibid*, p.829.

[41] M. Ray & E. Jacka, 'Indian Television: An Emerging Regional Force' in J. Sinclair, E. Jacka & S. Cunningham (eds.) *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision*. Oxford University Press, U.K. 1996, p. 93.

constructed in terms of the individual,[42] and as a result solutions, rewards and punishments are constructed in individual terms. This loss of group identity and socio-political context which most Hindi movie victims seem to suffer is further reinforced by allusions to spiritual power. In Hindi movies, members of the divine pantheon frequently descend from the heavens to punish the good and reward the evil, but even with divine sight, the class nature of suffering or the fact that 200 million Indians live below the poverty line seems to escape them, for the movie devas and devis who bestow boons also act only on behalf of individuals. The gods apparently eschew sociological analysis so that evil seems always the result of individual acts rather than a complex of historical, cultural and economic factors, and is vanquished as such. Divine retribution assures the audience that the perpetrators of evil are always punished and its victims eventually recompensed but this occurs in such a contextual void as to render the movies questionable as a form of consciousness raising. If literacy rates were not as low as they are (for Scheduled Castes for all-India, according to the 1991 census, male literacy rates were 37.41% and female 23.76)[43] this may not matter much, but as access to formal adult education is so limited, it behoves the popular film industry to occasionally present plots which rely on concerted social action to resolve social problems.

As Ambedkar, the leading 'Untouchable' activist and architect of the Indian constitution argued: "There is no place for an individual in Indian society. The Hindu religion does not teach how an individual should behave with another individual."[44] Varnashrama Dharma codified class not individual relations; part of the fantasy then of the Hindi movie is this artificial construction of a supposed society of individuals. While individualism is hardly a malevolent phenomenon in itself, in the virtually unbelievable context of two hundred million people living below the poverty line, it does convey sinister overtones of social control. Clearly such perspectives have many benefits for governments wishing to avoid

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[42] Admittedly this is frequently a lower class individual but, male or female, they are most remarkable for their individuality, from their voluptuous bodies to their musical proclivities to their pantomimed gestures and grimaces, these are individuals suffering personal rather than communal distress and relying on indidvidual rather than collective solutions to that distress.

[43] K. S. Singh *The Scheduled Castes: Anthropological Survey of India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995, p. 1369.

[44] B. R. Ambedkar 'What Path Freedom?' in Barabara Joshi (ed.) *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*. Zed Books, New Delhi, 1986, p.30.

the moral responsibilities of a secular state but the effect on audiences may be less salutary.

Regionally, South Asia does not offer much encouragement in the way of secular virtues or practical social models. In Sri Lanka the long-running Sinhalese-Tamil conflict has produced an artificial and violent opposition between Buddhism and Hinduism which has been supported or exacerbated by religious leaders on both sides. While Pakistan was officially declared an Islamic Republic in 1956, the state is riddled by such a confounding of Islamic values with elite and feudal power structures, it is difficult to determine which values are most significant; few are obviously virtuous. Moreover political tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir have frequently acted as a rallying point for politicians of both countries unable to generate enthusiasm for domestic platforms or their lack thereof. In Bangladesh also there is a high degree of intellectually unexplored compromise between political parties, religious institutions and trade unions which does not appear to be abating. In Afghanistan after almost two decades of violent occupation and civil war, the secular state is currently hostage to the theocratic ambitions of the Taliban, as well as to interventions from Pakistan, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Though sceptics might argue that the continuing tensions are the Afghan version of extensive community debate it is hardly a model which will elucidate issues for the rest of South Asia. It is also the case that while the economies of these states languish and viable welfare programs in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are non-existent, there will be no regional pressure on India to resolve its internal socio-economic tensions. While religious themes can be manipulated so easily to construct electoral power it is unlikely that the region will encourage secular forces or deeper ethical debates over inequitable social patterns.

Yet everyone in India is keen to go to Ramrajya. The key to Ramrajya is dutiful action. In the reign of Rama, society was harmonious because persons within all varna performed their duties with a sense of dedication to the gods and love of humanity. Nor was it simply the immaturity of scientific knowledge and a desire for higher incarnation which motivated this. Ramrajya, whether it is taken as literal truth or mythical vision, was an inspired society, a community of people inspired by the heroism of their Prince who overcame not simply material dispossession and social alienation, but all selfish desire, all negative

ambition, all sense of revenge.[45] The three upper varnas of this celebrated society would also have been inspired by a sophisticated literature and an education system which spoke incessantly of duty. The cultural life of the society would have been vibrant and communal though multicentric. The seasons were mild and nature beneficent; the population was extremely small by today's Indian-city standards. Though coercion was also an inspiration to action, it was dispensed conscientiously and without selfish desire (*nishkama karma*).

The India of today is different and like many gods, has more than one aspect. One aspect looks to the past, through two and a half millennia, to a time of dutiful action, civil harmony and social prescription. It is beguiled by the purity of Ramrajya but unable to act according to its precepts. This aspect is wrathful as it scowls from Mount Kailash at Pakistan and others who may threaten. A second, smiling aspect looks to the future, to the time when the vanguard of developing states finally achieves its rightful place in global society; to an India which bestows aid rather than receives it, and where every family has three foreign-investment-developed mopeds parked somewhere. This aspect smiles because it believes the flush toilet solved the problem of Untouchability and other technological miracles are sure to turn the place into Ramrajya somehow or other. This aspect is gregarious and economically rational and of course, this aspect (the feminine aspect?) is quietly irreligious.

But every self-respecting god has at least three faces: India's contemplative aspect is yet to articulate its vision but it must be one which synthesises the other two. India now has a vibrant media which could serve as the locus of a new self-perception which does not dwell on the glories of the past but earnestly works to revitalise that mythic harmony. The media is the perfect site from which to encourage in all citizens a truly vibrant debate of Indian culture, and most particularly of how Ramrajya might be achievable.

If India is ever to be a truly secular society then the entire population needs to be educated to a secular system. For the nationalist-secularists of the Congress Party in 1947, that education had in almost every instance entailed a privileged status,

[45] In many respects the struggle of the Prophet Mohammad to establish the religion of Islam is similar to the struggle of Ram and in the early umma one can see the same collective inspiration and determination to establish a righteous society.

a very high standard of living, access to a stimulating educational system, job prospects relevant to skills, and expectations not only of full citizenship but of making a necessary and appreciated contribution to the greater society. Such men were enabled to see secularism as the only rational model of social progress, but if their successors want almost half a billion low caste people to share their belief system, then they may have to avail them of the same learning context. Secular beliefs, cannot be acquired through mystical processes or an intimate experience of 'the void'; and without them India is not a secular society. For the great mass of the population, Backward and Scheduled castes forming approximately 65% of the total, life experience conspires against such a possibility and social data based in Varnashrama Dharma formulate the basic cognitive schema with which they perceive their (frequently minuscule) world.

Of course Indians are not going to share learning contexts and socialization processes anytime soon, but a media system with the skills and workforce of Bollywood might arguably construct a reasonable imitation of context and processes which celebrates the uniqueness and analyses the dichotomies of Indian culture. Doordarshan[46] has had for some time limited ambitions in regard to mass education but most projects have failed to generate the enthusiasm required for a true cultural renaissance or even for adult education. Programs will need to be alluring as well as instructive but surely no apparatus is better experienced in the science of allure than Bollywood.

What programs might we envision for such an ambition? First of all, an eclectic variety of formats from current affairs programs to soap operas to games shows, all of which encourage the widest debate possible on all aspects of social and cultural life. Issues which call out for debate include Varnashrama Dharma, its origins, its goals, its degrees of social mobility, and its validity in the 21st century. The wider nature of a secular society also needs to be addressed: what are the duties of a democratic government; how important are egalitarian ideals; can egalitarianism be achieved? The material realities of Ramrajya need also to be explored and made explicit: is Ramrajya simply a metaphor for a society of harmonious relations or is it a realm of strict adherence to traditional religious and customary law as practised in the 5th century BCE? How is Ramrajya to be

[46] The primary government-owned television broadcaster.

achieved? How is it to be inspired? A related theme which might be explored is the *Bhagavad Gita's* doctrine of dutiful action (how is duty authorised? by whom? for what purpose?).

At the moment such a list seems to offer all the allure of a first year university course in ethics but if any single agency can deconstruct the mundane world and transmute it into a golden era replete with danger, excitement, glamour *and* learning, then Bollywood is that agency and a nation boogying to the shastras must be better than a nation destroying itself in communal and class jealousies. The Ramrajya of the BJP, with its 'declared nuclear capacity' and regional tensions, upper and middle class propriety and half a billion lower castes in social turmoil is not alluring. Nor is an economic miracle for the upper and middle classes achieved through the criminalization of politics, harsh structural readjustment and social opportunism.

India does have a truly 'psychedelic' cultural history which deserves celebration as well as an almost universal longing for its renaissance. India also desires to achieve the front rank of nation states in some new and as yet undiscovered 'order' of moral and cultural authenticity. It can only achieve this for all its citizens, however; if those most severely oppressed are treated to culturally appropriate learning experiences which share with them the joys and duties of being an Indian citizen. Roger Ramjet in Ayodhya (or Raja Ranjit?) may require an act of faith; but faith is the most common currency of India, surely a little structural adjustment is in order. Let the *leela* begin![47]

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[47] Krishna Leela is the term referring to the illusory dance or play of Krishna (or everyman) as he explores his own essential nature and the world around him.

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