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9. July 1994

Online at <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/49714/>

MPRA Paper No. 49714, posted 10. September 2013 11:24 UTC

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 28 (Jul. 9, 1994), pp. 1798-1802

Published by: [Economic and Political Weekly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4401461>

Accessed: 31/07/2013 09:13

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# Political Economy of Secularism

## Rediscovery of India

Nasir Tyabji

*As it was in Europe, secularism in India is an intrinsic part of the process of the emergence of a modern identity of the people of a multi-language and multi-ethnic society, the necessity for which is being continuously generated by industrialisation and urbanisation. The emergence of this identity, however, has been hampered by the failure at the political level: the inability to evolve political units appropriate for the expression of regional aspirations, to entrench and extend the process of agrarian reforms, and to unify and modernise the systems of personal law, etc.*

IT is a standard procedure in discussions of Indian secularism to make an initial proviso: while in Europe the process of secularisation incorporated the process of the separation of the state from the church, this has not been so in India. Various interpretations usually follow of the philosophical basis for the Indian use of the term secularism. Commonly, those run along the lines of the statement that the state in India is committed to providing equal treatment to the adherents of all religious denominations, that it would be equidistant from all variants of religious belief and philosophy.

The argument of this paper is that secularism in India (as, in fact, in Europe) is an intrinsic part of the process of giving shape to a modern identity for the people of a multi-language and multi-ethnic society, the necessity for which is being continuously generated by the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. The process of secularisation is therefore a component of the political economy of Indian development. The challenges, issues and prospects can all be best observed from an analysis of the relationship of secularism to post-independence developments in India's economy and polity, of course, to those aspects of these developments which impinge more immediately on secularism.

### I

D D Kosambi's celebrated review of Nehru's *Discovery of India* was advisedly titled 'The Bourgeoisie Comes of Age in India' [Kosambi 1946]. It signified that the leading ideologue of the independent Indian state had come to terms with the past, had produced a version of the process of cultural synthesis underway in India which would be appropriate for the consolidation of Indian nationhood. Of course, the vision required elaboration and popularisation, but at the ideological level, these writings of Nehru were as significant as were the political programmes of the national movement—thus had the bourgeoisie truly come of age.

Clearly, the vision incorporated a concept of the Indian nation and of the relationship between the distinct cultures (both regional

and religious) of the peoples of India. Implicit in this was also a notion of the ways in which the state would relate to these cultures and their processes of interaction and change—this was effectively the cultural aspect of the secular Indian state.

Primary amongst these were steps towards political democratisation, by the formation of linguistic-national states as embodiments of subnational identity, and of autonomous regions where the identity of a concentration of the population, although not yet identifiably distinct, was achieving self-conscious political expression. So also were steps at decentralisation of political and administrative power to elected panchayats.

These steps were necessary for the movement forward. To preserve the basis of the advances already made it was essential to undertake agrarian reforms, in this context not on the grounds of equity but to prevent the uncertainties of tenure adding to those of physical agricultural operations on a precarious rainfed regime. In the area of agrarian reform, thus, there was need to protect tenants' rights, to redistribute land surplus to prescribed ceilings, and, above all, to reduce the uncertainty caused by the physical environment by extending the reach of irrigation in the vast rainfed parts of the country. These conditions gave scope for the reinforcement of religiosity and prevented the consolidation of the "scientific temper".<sup>1</sup>

One area critical for the consolidation of national consciousness was that of providing equal treatment to women and men through personal law reform.

The state was also to be the instrument for transforming the consciousness of the people of India, for the formation of a secular society which would be distinguished by the fact that problems—not only of the present and future, but of the past—would be analysed by the scientific approach. In line with this perspective, great emphasis was laid on the growth of higher education and its supporting infrastructural facilities. These, of course, already had their rationale in contributing to poverty eradication through industrial growth and income

generation, generally. These steps were essential for the consolidation of secularism at the societal level, and even for its preservation within the state administration.

In all these areas, the record has been poor. The prerequisite for political decentralisation, the formation of linguistic states was grudgingly granted, in many cases only after mass protest movements. Actual devolution of power to the states has been absent, in spite of the impressive evidence, exemplified in the degeneration of subnational movements into separatist channels, that subnational identities can be effectively mobilised only if adequate power is available to the political representatives of those communities aspiring to subnational status. In spite of a great deal of discussion about the merits of the devolution of power to local levels, neither the institutions of urban nor those of rural local government have had any substantial period of continuous functioning.

The record in other areas has been little better: the performance in compulsory primary education is well known and this was to be a critical component for the initial inculcation of the scientific temper.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, except for the early post-independence abolition of zamindari, there has been no effective advance in the area of agrarian reform. The progress in the area of personal law, as with land reform and primary education, has not only been minimal but in some instances, as in the constitutional amendment following the Shah Bano case, been both short-sighted and reactionary.

### II

All these failures have expressed themselves in political form—extra constitutional in the case of separatist movements, and, constitutionally, in the slow but definite decline in the electoral support on which Congress governments of the post-independence period have been based.

The vision presumed that with the attainment of independence and the acceptance of a republican Constitution, there would not only be a broad consensus on these

prerequisites for moving, under the aegis of a secular state, to a secular society, but that there would be no processes in society which might work at odds with the secularising agenda. In the event, not only was there opposition to the principles underlying secularism, but these were given substantial weight by their articulation by sectarian political organisations, asserting the priority of religious identity as the national characteristic. These were essentially developments of the tendency of religious revivalism, which formed the basis for two of the competing conceptions of the national movement, the two-nation theory of the Muslim separatism and the Hindu *rashtra* theory of Hindu nationalism.

As a political response to the erosion of its electoral base, the Congress had, even in the time of Nehru, been resorting to the encouragement of precisely these conceptions of Indian nationhood. Organisationally, it had rejected these in the pre-independence period. During the Nehruvian period, this compromise with the secular conception of the nation took place primarily in response to the alienation of the peasantry, artisans and lower level employees of the *ex-zamindari* structure from the Congress, and dates from the time of the second general elections in 1957. Steps were then taken to use the residue of a specific Muslim identity consciousness amongst a section of them in order to create a political challenge to the increasing left-wing influence. This was apparent both in Muslim-dominated parts of Kerala, and amongst the urban Urdu speakers in Hyderabad. Attempts at casteist (or 'Hindu') consolidation had taken place even earlier in the north, when the Congress connived at the installation of the idols in the Babri masjid in 1949. It is now well-accepted that the stubbornness of the UP Congress organisation on this matter, in spite of the intervention of the central leadership, was due to their electoral calculations.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the very serious long-term political consequences of this step, it involved an implicit statement about 16th century history (a conception of 'invaders' and of an indigenous population), contrary to the Congress's official position and to the postulates of the Indian Constitution.

These kinds of political action represented the injection of religion into politics in a manner qualitatively different to Gandhi's. It was also to lead to the consolidation of a political identity and a leadership amongst Muslims, in particular, which was self-consciously sectarian and, more importantly, was accepted as such by the Congress. This policy is a natural corollary of the tendency noted earlier, of helping the consolidation of a 'Muslim' sectarian leadership. Over a period of time, this group felt able to pronounce that its own interests in protecting instruments of patronage to a few fellow Muslims were, in

fact, the interests of the religious community as a whole [Tyabji 1992].

### III

In addition, there were problems in the political and social sphere, requiring resolution. These, if not dealt with in ways that kept the objective of a secular unified India uppermost, were to lead to further strains on the secular polity at the political and social levels. Primary amongst the issues were the questions of subnational movements, which were to grow in force under the consolidating and crystallising role of commercial exchange and educational advance. The underlying process, though sometime traceable in cultural form back even to the pre-colonial period, took on the political form of a sub-national movement in the contemporary era.

The process of the independence movement had included, within itself, the process of crystallisation of linguistic sub-national identities [Guha 1984]. These developed at varying rates, ranging from the explicit expression amongst Tamil, Marathi and Bengali speaking peoples in the 19th century, to that of the large part of the Hindi-speaking India where, even today, truly clear-cut contours of subnational linguistic-cultural identity are not perceptible. The problems of a linguistic subnational identity formation are particularly difficult in the parts of the Hindi-speaking belt which were within the former princely states and were, therefore, excluded from the consciousness transforming processes of the independence movement.

The first issue that confronts a programme of secularisation is that of ensuring that in the process of identity formation, the consciousness generated is not that of a sectarian past and, therefore, of a sectarian present. This is a complex task in those instances where there was political inactivity during the independence movement due to the feebleness of the people's movement. Here, collective memories of political activism are confined to the military revolts of the pre-colonial period, inevitably tinged with a communal sectarian element.

Unlike the peasant wars and peasant-led revolutions of western Europe, the revolts of the peasantry in Maharashtra, which led to the rise of the maratha regimes in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, did not, in fact, change the agrarian structure noticeably. Generally, they initiated processes inducting isolated representatives from peasant castes into the zamindari structure [Habib 1983]. Similar features characterised the jat revolts in the Doab leading to the formation of the Bharatpur state, and that of the peasantry professing Sikhism in the Punjab [Satish Chandra 1986]. What was to be politically of importance was the parallel drawn by votaries of the concept of communal-nationalist ideology

(basing themselves on a homogenised concept of Hinduism): they identified the zamindar-appropriated revolts against the Mughal ruling class (of distinct denominational or ethnic origin) with nationalist movements against British colonial rule.<sup>4</sup>

The political challenge to the Congress, now from the right wing of the political spectrum as well as the left, began to grow after 1967. Hitherto, the Congress had been dismissive of the question of the political challenge from the left, as it had seen itself as the incarnation of the Indian national movement. This challenge came to be articulated when the Congress, under the pressure of its more oligarchical supporters, withdrew from the pre-independence assurances, outlined earlier. The Congress under Indira Gandhi now began a process of reinforcing the challenge to the conception of the Indian nation, which had been the pre-independence legacy and was incorporated in the Constitution. This was evident in its response to the electoral alienation of the peasantry in UP and in Rajasthan, in particular. In UP, the strategy was to win across the upper castes through a communal consolidation (initiated by the Babri masjid events of 1949), by authoritarian measures against the artisans (largely Muslim) and the Muslim intelligentsia centred in Aligarh university. In Rajasthan, the policy encouraged the underlying anti-Muslim attitudes amongst the rajputs, particularly of Mewar, by portraying their 16th century battles against the Mughals as precursors of the independence movement. This was the first time that a political action by the Congress was expressly geared towards a rereading of Indian history and, therefore, of Indian nationhood.<sup>5</sup> With Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980, political actions to reinforce the notion of Hinduism-as-nationalism increased. While the responses to the Sikh separatist movement was designed to institutionalise fears of the enemy within, the most clear-cut indication of this approach was during the 1983 assembly elections in Jammu, and the 1984 parliamentary elections.

The period from 1984 onwards has seen the RSS appropriating the instruments that Indira Gandhi had introduced into the political system, of moulding both the national and the subnational aspirations of increasingly affluent rural and urban sections of the population into a consciousness of a Hindu view of history. Although the ideologues of the RSS and some of the 19th century nationalists had incorporated this view, the organisational growth of the Jan Sangh (the political front of the RSS) had hitherto been successful largely in areas where concentrations of refugees from west Punjab and east Bengal were located. Its appeal was then based on experiential evidence of the Hindu-Muslim (or Sikh-Muslim) divide. Later in the 1960s,



70s and early 80s, communal consolidation took place in geographical pockets where interoccupational rivalry between the two religious communities could be projected in communal terms. The rapid growth of communal consciousness in the 80s was brought about by generalising the experience of the supposed dichotomy through the historical element, the 'injustices' of history, and more specifically, the supposedly barbarous acts of various ethnically distinct rulers of pre-colonial India.

It is this growth of communal consciousness and the projection solely of the state's promotion of sectarian minority interests as 'pseudo-secularism' that has generalised the debate about secularism in terms of inter-religious balance, above all. The various components of structural change in the political economy, necessary to advance the process of secularisation, have very largely been ignored in the recent debate. There is, in fact, overwhelming pressure on the secular national approach to the history of pre-colonial and colonial India to which the Congress has responded by abdication from defending its heritage. It is this that compels re-examination of the more significant features of history, which otherwise might have been seen to be more or less satisfactorily resolved by the ideology incorporated in the national movement.

#### IV

The Delhi sultanate was certainly distinct from the state systems that it supplanted in terms of the ethnic origin of its ruling class, an amalgam of Turkish-Ghorian elements. More importantly, it differed because of the introduction of an administrative innovation: the transferable revenue assignment or the 'iqta' [Habib 1992b].<sup>6</sup> Significantly this system, once introduced, was used to the advantage of the rajput states of the north, and the Vijayanagar empire of the south. This is an important indication of the ways in which distinct ethnic-ideological elements moulded the medieval states in India, presumably also their successors. This created the basis for a composite culture rooted in state structures.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the principles of revenue administration of the pre-colonial state, the other aspects critical to evaluating its possibly sectarian character are the recruitment policies for higher administrative posts and its systems of civil and criminal law.<sup>8</sup> There seems little doubt that a succession of ruling dynasties professing Islam attempted to enforce the 'shariat' in matters of both civil and criminal law in India. However, this was often difficult to do in the face of a striking feature, the limited nature of the hold of Islam over the mass of the population. Except on the peripheries of the subcontinent in Malabar, Kashmir, western Punjab and eastern Bengal, the peasantry remained unmoved by Islam.

These areas were, in fact, ones where the institutions of the centralised state were the weakest or the most unstable. It would then seem that while drawing legitimacy from Islam, ruling political circles refrained from the exercise of state authority for propagating their faith, even to the extent of jeopardising the stability of their rule at some extreme moments of crisis [Mukhia 1990].

There are substantial data now available on the intermixing of officials of ethnically foreign origin, of Indian Muslims and of Hindus in the power structure. In terms of recruitment to the higher administrative posts, the policy of incorporating representatives of the local agrarian elite ensured that as the Delhi sultanate expanded to become the Mughal empire, recruitment on a non-denominational basis became more widespread.<sup>9</sup> The regions were also integrated, and given identity, by the bureaucratic structure, essentially engaged in the collection of land tax and the maintenance of internal order.<sup>10</sup>

The interesting feature of this revenue administration structure is that by the time the Mughals took charge of the state apparatus, the revenue department of the administration was dominated by Hindu officials [Siddiqui 1992]. Given that the bulk of the bigger iqta holders were likely to be Muslim, this result of the policy emphasises a central point. It is possible to speculate that denominational differences between them and the local (Hindu) revenue officials probably provided the base for intercommunal problems in the future.

To this a couple of other points may be added: the first is the absence of any sign of political protest in the Sanskrit literature, which implies the absence of any felt subordination of brahminical interests, either material or spiritual. This was in sharp contrast to the writings in the regional languages by the bhakti school [Alam Khan 1976]. Given the well known evidence for the emergence of pluralist traditions amongst the artisans and peasantry through the sufi and bhakti movements, this literature signifies peasant and artisan protest against the regime. And yet, as has been pointed out, there is no recorded evidence of 'inter-communal' conflict before the beginning of the 18th century, 1704 to be precise [Mukhia 1990].<sup>11</sup>

#### V

The paradoxical nature of the overtly quiescent Hindu-Muslim communal relations in the period of Indian history when the state was ordered according to 'Islamic' revenue collection and legal principles was followed by an equally complex situation during the subsequent period. On the one hand it has been noted that there was greater cultural uniformity in India between 1750 and 1850 than ever before (or since) [Mujeeb 1967; Goetz 1938]. On the other, as noted earlier, once the first recorded instance of communal

tension arose in 1704, the entire 18th and 19th centuries saw many cases of communal tension and violence [Bayly 1985].

Broadly speaking, there seem to have been two forms of conflict that reflected themselves in terms of inter-communal assertion and tension. The first were those cases where the regional states, successors to the Moghul empire, attempted to redefine the balance in cultural-religious observances within the boundaries of an accepted framework of religious compromise, while otherwise continuing to encourage the growth of religious syncretism. In Mysore, for instance, Tipu Sultan combined attacks on the culture of the Kerala Nair aristocracy and the Portuguese and Syrian Christian population of the Malabar coast, with patronage of temples and inclusion of the brahmins and the traditional landlord communities in his civil and military bureaucracies respectively [Bayly 1985].<sup>12</sup>

The second form of conflict arose from economic causes, principally over the issue of land in the rural areas, and the rise to economic supremacy of traders and money-lenders leading to urban land sales, across the religious communities [Bayly 1985]. Further, these often took place under conditions where the ownership right was still ambiguous, as in the case of 'waqf' land [Powers 1989]. Finally, in those cases where British rule had consolidated, their role in the political process leading to the construction of a modern communal identity has also to be noted [Pandey 1992; Prior 1993; Freitag 1978].

As the British empire in India increased its geographic spread, so did its responsibility for ensuring at least overt inter-communal amity, as the lives of distinct ethnic communities were increasingly integrated by the economic processes underway, particularly urbanisation.<sup>13</sup>

#### VI

The 18th century was a period of localised inter-communal conflict, largely the result of the social and economic rivalry of groups distinguished by ethnic and religious differences. The 19th century saw the expression of a new form of political ideology which, by contrasting current non-Hindu social, economic and cultural conditions with that of a Hindu mythical past, represented one trend in the evolving concept of the Indian nation [Tucker 1976; Harvey 1986]. What gave force to this political tendency, represented by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in Punjab in the first half of the 19th century, and by Tilak and Vivekananda in Maharashtra and Bengal respectively, was the appropriation of the mythic power of the history of the zamindari revolts against the Mughals and its transformation into the precursors of a national movement destined to restore Hindu rule in India [Rothermund 1971].

At about the same time there evolved, from isolated attempts at the propagation of an Islamic practice purified of extraneous elements, the growth of the two-nation theory—that Hindus and Muslims, viewed as blocks, formed distinct national elements [Habib 1961]. The third stream worked towards the creation of national consciousness on the basis of the empirical reality: several centuries of inter-ethnic accommodation described earlier; the history of communal strife of the colonial period and, above all, the fact of colonial rule. Arising at the close of the 19th century, it has been the most creative concept on which future social and economic developments could be based, largely shaped by the national movement.

As the national independence movement began to grow in strength, particularly during the phase of the 'extremist' predominance in Congress politics, and the Gandhian period, levers of administrative intervention by the British were increasingly used. This was not only to keep the balance in local situations, but to encourage political movements based on sectarian concepts of Indian nationhood, that of the Hindu Rashtra, and Muslim League's two-nation theory [Brennan 1984; Singh 1985].

It was in this political context that a serious miscalculation was made, both collectively by the Congress and by the leading individual figures of the national movement, including Gandhi, Nehru and Azad. As has been mentioned earlier, they assumed that the increasing incidence of communal intolerance was the result of imperial rule and of its encouragement of divisive tendencies. In the context of an ongoing mass movements, and the British Indian government's attempts to counterpoise them with concessions to sectional demands, the 'artificial' nature of the inter-communal divide may have been the most apparent. The end result of this attitude, however, was that the entire course of the national movement was allowed to pass without any attempt being made to further the processes of social and cultural integration, to extend it beyond the residue of the traditionally formed process of inter-communal interaction. The consequence of this, in turn, was that with independence, and the beginning of the period of planned industrialisation, there was the negative political legacy of nearly two centuries of cohabitation of urban dwellers whose ethnic and religious identities remained distinct. These may have been submerged by the mass actions which accompanied the independence movement, but they had in no way been consciously modified to accord with a society in transition towards incorporating a modern secular industrial culture.

## VII

With partition and the formation of Pakistan, the Muslim League was able to

claim the fruits of its theory, of a Muslim and a Hindu nation existing in colonial India. Its counterpart, the theory of the Hindu Rashtra although actively propagated below the surface of political life, faced considerable ideological opposition after the assassination of Gandhi, and was not to be effectively resurrected until the 1980s. It is the events of the post-independence period that crystallise all problems of the interaction of remnants of past problems with the present.

Earlier sections of the paper have dealt at varying length with historical phases in the development of the socio-political identity of India, in terms of the structure of the state and of society. The rationale for an historical approach is based on the understanding that each phase of history has generated distinct issues of intercommunal relations which need to be resolved in the process of the formation of a secular Indian society. Implicit in the argument has been the fact that each major stage, the pre-colonial, the colonial, and the post-colonial up to the 1980s, has found that problems accumulated during the earlier phase have remained unresolved. This has been because either the priorities of the wielders of state power in the succeeding phase have been distinct to those of their predecessors or, as in the case of the nationalist leaders, they have viewed the problem as entirely political and imposed from outside.

To recapitulate the argument: failures at the political level (decentralisation and the formation of political units appropriate for the expression of regional aspirations), at the economic level (agrarian reforms, measures to extend irrigation and so on) and in the sphere of unification and modernisation of systems of personal law prevented the consolidation of a secular society in India. Simultaneously, the lack of attention to primary education implied that the process of secularisation envisaged though the growth of the scientific temper remained an accretion, rather than a consciousness transforming process. As the Congress' inegalitarian economic policies furthered its alienation from the people, the strategy adopted was to draw in disaffected groups by appeals to their religious identity.

The efficacy of this strategy in the short term led to its appropriation by the RSS, which managed to extend its electoral support far beyond its 'normal' constituency. Not only did this development lead to the popularisation of the Hindu Rashtra theory of Indian nationhood, it also pushed into the background the political and economic issues underlying the process of secularisation.

## Notes

[Presented at the Seminar on Ethnicity and Nation Building organised by the Centre for South and South East Asian Studies of the University of Madras, and USEFI in March 1994. Meena Radhakrishna has made a substantial

contribution, intellectually and editorially, to this paper.]

1 The relationship between uncertain prospects for rain and religiosity is well brought out in the following quotation. "In an agricultural society, rain brings life, work, happiness, prosperity and plenty, and occasionally, misery and destruction. But men cannot live without it; it dominates their lives, dictates the terms under which they live, regulates the seasons of hard work and lazy indolence. It controls the timing of weddings and festivals, gives people their faiths and their beliefs and their superstitions. It is their eternal protector, benevolent master, their blind avenger of fate... (p 5)

"If the prices are high, it is the fault of the townspeople. If the taxes are high, it is the fault of the government. But if there is no rain, it is fate. 'God is against us,' they say, 'It is beyond our hands; it is fate'. And people find consolation in such a statement. That is their philosophy and that is their religion, for they know no other. They merely turn to the heavens and ask, 'How long, oh god, how long are we to suffer?'" (p6) [Sreenivasan 1980]

2 In any case, one noticeable gap in the perspective of an advance towards a secular society was the absence of an organic link between higher educational expansion and primary and secondary education. It was only on the basis of the satisfactory growth of these that specialised higher education could lead to the growth of the scientific temper.

3 These were that this indifference would win the support of the politically dominant upper castes, and reduce the electoral prospects for the Socialist Party candidate, Acharya Narendra Dev, in the assembly elections of the early 1950s [Chaube 1990].

4 It is important to note here that major figures of Indian economic nationalism seem also to have been unable to rise above a view of history centred on the ethnicity or religion of the ruling classes [Sudhir Chandra 1985].

5 It is instructive to note the contrast with the mobilisation of the UP peasantry by Charan Singh. In spite of the historical experience of the Bharatpur and Deeg states in opposition to Mughal rule, no attempt was made to highlight religious denominational differences as a mobilising symbol.

6 The principal feature of this system consisted of an arrangement by which the management and appropriation of the revenues of distinct territorial units lay collectively with the members of the ruling class, under the control of a central authority. Individuals holding assignments were not allowed to acquire hereditary rights over the regions in their jurisdiction. During the succeeding centuries of Lodhi and Mughal rule, the system changed in a variety of ways, both affecting and defining the degree of political centralisation. However, the principal underlying the system did not change until the introduction of the British colonial regime. This principal lay in the institution of state property in land, and its obverse, the absence of private landed property. Equally significant for the purposes of this paper is the ideological basis for the concept of the iqta. It has been argued that while Islamic law had a well-defined concept of private property in land, the practice of Islamic states was heavily influenced by the institutions of the nomadic societies of central and western Asia, which were also the



- core areas of these states. These nomadic societies, with their concept of the tribal possession of territory, are said to be the sources of the iqta system of revenue administration, brought to India by the Ghorian dynasties [Athar Ali 1992].
- 7 Both of these were 'Islamic' polities in the sense that they accepted its traditions in critical matters such as taxation and state property. This may have been due to the efficiency with which the system worked in the interests of regional sections of the ruling classes, such as the rajputs, and the realisation that while its origin may have been Islamic, its utility was universal. Significant in this context is the reference in the Guru Granth Sahib without any hostility or rancour, to the 'Muslim' character of the state [Mukhia 1990].
  - 8 The imposition of a denominational system of jurisprudence on a society in which multiple faiths coexist has been termed, in fact, as one of the chief features of a theocracy. The other is the exercise of state power for propagation of the state religion, the efficacy of this policy obviously made visible in terms of conversions.
  - 9 The rural elite were defined by the structure of rural society, which consisted of a pyramid based on the village as a unit of social production. The two social groups involved in agricultural production were the cultivators, sharecroppers, or tenants-at-will, usually of low status in the social order, and the zamindars, whose status was substantially higher. The village level zamindars were linked by social ties to others, these linkages usually covering about 30-40 villages in all. An elder of the group or jati, linked in this way, was variously known as the Raja, Rai or Chaudhury of the region [Habib 1974; Kumar 1983].
  - 10 The local unit of the bureaucracy was usually centred on the 'qasbah' or township, which served as a market and a religious and cultural centre of varying importance.
  - 11 Friction might be particularly pronounced in the qasbah where issues of underlying economic rivalry could easily take on inter-denominational forms.
  - 12 The explanation for these contradictory tendencies may lie in the imperatives of state responses to socio-cultural consolidation. It has been argued that during the pre-colonial period, regionalised linguistic-cultural patterns, "communities of culture" emerged [Guha 1984]. These processes, in some cases, were encouraged by the patronage of the regional states. In most cases the autonomous kingdoms that arose with the decline of the Mughal empire, were not the result of peasant revolts against the prevailing (generalised) zamindar dominated agrarian structure but assertions of zamindari independence from the Mughal state [Satish Chandra 1973, 1986]. Encouragement of syncretist tendencies may have been with the intention of forming a regional identity. The adjustment of the prevailing equilibrium between the conventions of one religion and another, on the other hand, were designed to strengthen the local zamindari base, in favour of the section with the predominant denominational affiliation.
  - 13 The economic processes themselves led to changes in the economic and political balance of power, between specific occupational groups, such as traders and the traditional rural elite. These changes took on a communal identification when the occupational

groups were also distinct in terms of religious denomination. It has been argued that within a context of religious tolerance, there was an implicit balance between the symbols of religious display of the major religious communities [Prior 1993]. The precedence that would be given to the observance of Moharrum, or to Ramnavami or Dasehra respectively, was an index of the pre-eminence of one or the other community in an urban context. The growth of the movement in veneration of Ram was itself a striking feature of 19th century north India, which signified the growth of a tradition of the open and public practice of Hinduism. This, in turn, provided the basis for competing claims on the use of public spaces. The colonial administration's attempt to resolve the contest over precedence lay through the norm of the 'custom'. It was the procedure to determine, through local informants, the customary practice in vogue before the formalisation of colonial rule. It was then decreed that this practice was to be the basis for all administrative decisions involving procedures: in terms of route selection for processions, of the overt or covert sanction to cow-slaughter, of the playing of music in processions along specific routes, and so on. The purpose of codifying the custom-as-norm was to ensure that administrative decisions taken at different points of time were consistent. This entirely overlooked the fundamental fact that "custom" was an inaccurate guide to a convention which changed as social and economic change took place. It appears, in fact, that a great deal of the intercommunal tension and violence of the colonial period was itself due to the inflexible nature of administrative decisions based on the concept of an unchanging custom [Prior 1993; Masselos 1976, 1982].

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