

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Communalism has been an important theme in Indian politics since the 1880s. During the first three decades after independence, even after the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, no political force gained substantial power in the name of Hinduism. From the mid-1980s there has been a resurgence of a belligerent and new kind of Hindu nationalism in India's public life and in its political institutions. In the main, the Hindu nationalist movement has defined itself in opposition to Islam and Muslims. Hindu revivalists have promoted a claim that the Muslim minority in India threatens Hindus and have sought to establish India as a primarily Hindu nation (*rashtra*), based on a notion of Hindu ethos, values and religion. The ideology and politics of *Hindutva* – the quality of being a Hindu – was accompanied by a rapid increase in large-scale communal (Hindu–Muslim) riots in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ Major communal violence spread throughout India in 1990 and following the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya in 1992.

Gujarat, one of India's most prosperous states, has been vital for the growth of communalism. Since the mid-1980s Gujarat became the site of recurring communal violence. The state turned into a nerve centre for the Hindu nationalist movement and has come to be seen as the *Hindutva* laboratory. The rising communalism in Gujarat culminated in a massacre of Muslims in many parts of the state in February 2002. The complicity of state officials in the killings raised doubts about the ability of the state to govern and to uphold the rule of law. It also demonstrated that such carnage in a country with one of the largest Muslim populations in the world had the potential for destabilising India's democracy and the secular consensus on which it was built.

Hindu nationalist politics rose with the growth of the popularity of a family of extremist Hindu organisations, known as the Sangh Parivar.

¹ Recurring communal violence since the 1980s took place, for example, in Ahmedabad, Aligarh, Bhagalpur, Bhiwandi, Coimbatore, Maliana, Meerut, Mumbai, Kanpur and Surat. The term *Hindutva* originates from V. D. Savarkar's book, *Hindutva, Who is a Hindu?*, Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969.

2 Introduction

The most prominent organisations have been the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal. These groups, with tens of thousands of members, had their origins, respectively, in the 1920s, 1960s and 1980s. The political face of the Hindutva movement, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was founded in 1980 as a reconstitution of the Jan Sangh Party. Both at the national level and in Gujarat the BJP became a leading political force and came to power in the 1990s. In 1996 the party was able to form a minority government at the centre, but it fell after two weeks. In both the 1998 and 1999 parliament (Lok Sabha) elections the BJP emerged as the largest party, winning 182 out of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, forming a government with its allies in the National Democratic Alliance. The BJP and its allies lost the 2004 elections, with BJP seats in parliament declining to 138, even though its share of the vote only decreased slightly.

The BJP's Performance in the Parliament (Lok Sabha) and Gujarat Assembly Elections²

	Gujarat Assembly		Parliament (Lok Sabha)	
	% of vote	No. of seats	% of vote	No. of seats
1980	14.02	9		
1984			7.40	2
1985	14.96	11		
1989			11.36	85
1990	26.69	67		
1991			20.07	120
1995	42.51	121		
1996			20.29	161
1998	44.81	117	25.59	182
1999			23.75	182
2002	49.85	127		
2004			22.16	138

Communalism has conventionally been understood by scholars, colonial administrators and policy makers as a sectarian conflict between Hindus and Muslims. In recent years, a significant scholarship has questioned the sectarian nature of this conflict. This book is a contribution to this literature, and sets out to trace the nature of the revival of communalism since the 1980s from a different point of departure. Its central

² Election Commission of India, http://eci.gov.in/ElectionResults/ElectionResults_fs.htm, 3/1/05.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

hypothesis is that the growth of communalism in the last two decades of the twentieth century did not lie in Hindu–Muslim antagonism alone. The growing appeal of Hindutva, and its inherent antagonism towards Muslims, was in fact an expression of deepening tensions among Hindus, nurtured by an instability in the relations between castes and by the ways in which changes in the caste regime were experienced by diverse groups of Hindus. These processes were conditioned by state policies and their political discourses.

The rise of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s was surprising. Hindu nationalism was able to attract widespread support despite several underlying contradictions. The notion of a monolithic Hindu identity, no more than a homogenous Muslim identity, is inherently implausible. Hinduism has been the bearer of diverse theological interpretations. Hindus have been deeply divided as much by caste, as by ritual observance and sectarian differences.³ It is therefore unclear why distinct groups of Hindus would mobilise on the basis of a unitary Hindu nationalism. Moreover, the idea that there are two homogenous communities of Hindus and Muslims in India that are hostile to each other is not borne out by historical evidence. The partition of India in 1947 was not a result of an enduring Hindu–Muslim strife at the national level of Indian politics.⁴ Finally, Hindu revivalists have rallied around the claim that the Muslim minority in India has been appeased by the state and are a threat to Hindus. Yet, Muslims have not organised themselves politically as a single community since independence, nor is it clear that they ever did so before.⁵ The general impoverishment of the Muslim minority in India also makes it difficult to explain why and how the rhetoric about their peril to the Hindu majority became so persuasive.

Scholars have broadly offered either a culturalist or a materialist explanation for the rise of communalism and the formation of a Hindu identity, or they have tried to find a golden mean between these two

³ See Romila Thapar, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', in Thapar (ed.), *Interpreting Early India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 67. Also see Gyanendra Pandey, 'Which of Us Are Hindus?', in G. Pandey (ed.), *Hindu and Others*, Delhi: Viking, 1993, pp. 238–72. In many ways, caste also exists among Muslims as a basis for social relations. See Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 7–8; Robert W. Stern, *Changing India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 71–4.

⁴ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Mushirul Hasan, 'Indian Muslims since Independence: In Search of Integration and Identity', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2, April 1988, p. 818; Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation*, pp. 71–2, 198.

⁵ Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

approaches.⁶ In the culturalist view, communal identity is often characterised as existing prior to, and independently of, the conflict.⁷ From a materialist standpoint, the appeal of communalism is attributed to economic and social factors or to manipulations of the masses by political elites, or even by the state.⁸ In the golden mean approach scholars have attempted to negotiate a way through the shortcomings of these dichotomous explanations. They accommodate the notion of a Hindu mentality, but reject the concept that it is natural or given. They recognise the political or religious processes and cultural symbols and practices that produce it and emphasise the emergence of a Hindu identity in opposition to an external threatening Other, through which it is defined.⁹

Culturalist approaches assume a transcendental Hindu identity.¹⁰ Communal conflict stems from the very reality, and permanence, of cultural differences between Hindus and Muslims. However, on closer examination, these cultural differences appear to be neither consistent nor fixed but often contingent on changing social circumstances. Moreover, divisions and differences among Hindus are sometimes even greater than those between some Hindus and some Muslims. If communal conflicts were the product of cultural differences, it would not be unreasonable to assume that such conflicts also developed among Hindus themselves.

Some works within the culturalist position deny the relevance of secularism for India. In their view, since secularism as a basis for the practices of the state is incompatible with the values derived from religious faith,

⁶ Also see Ornit Shani, 'The Resurgence of *EthnoHinduism* – a Theoretical Perspective', in Shlomo Ben-Ami, Yoav Peled and Alberto Spektrovski (eds.), *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation State*, London: Macmillan, 2000, pp. 268–76. For other mapping of the literature see, for example, Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 23–39.

⁷ This view is based especially on Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States', *The Interpretation of Culture*, London: Fontana, 1995, pp. 255–310.

⁸ This approach is also known as the constructivist approach in the study of ethnic conflicts.

⁹ These writings can be attributed, at least partly, to the appearance of the postcolonial discourse and the cultural turn in the study of Indian society and ethnicity and nationalism in general. To some extent, this discourse is a part of the realisation of Foucault's perspicacious view of Western 'truth' as 'another rule of knowledge'. Edward Said in his study of Orientalism applied this view. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979. Other works that form the intellectual base for these writings are, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994; Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 1–28, 159–82; Slavoj Žizek, 'Eastern Europe's Republic of Gilead', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, London: Verso, 1993.

¹⁰ See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, Appendix D, pp. 314–34; Daniel Gold, 'Organised Hinduism: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation', in Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalism Observed*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 531–93; Stanley Wolpert, 'Resurgent Hindu Fundamentalism', *Contention*, vol. 2, no. 3, Spring 1995, pp. 9–18.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

which are intrinsic to Indian culture, it cannot be an adequate guide for moral or political action. Some scholars suggest that ‘the traditional ways of life have, over the centuries, developed internal principles of tolerance . . . [which] must have a play in contemporary politics’.¹¹ In this perspective, religious neutrality and policies derived from it seem irrelevant to Indian politics, precisely because these policies ignore what is claimed to be the authentic indigenous tradition of religious tolerance in Hinduism. In this emphasis on an innate tolerance in Hinduism, these arguments legitimise, sometimes unintentionally, the ‘politics of religious identity’, thus playing into the hands of Hindutva forces. Indeed, the proponents of Hindutva have not been slow to present arguments from similar culturalist positions. They look back, for instance, to the ‘real’ traditions of a Hindu Golden Age, which declined under Muslim rule and which they seek to revive. They have also imagined a persistent historical friction between the two communities, dating it to the period of the Mughal Aurangzeb, who began, in their view, the ‘tradition’ of destroying Hindu temples in the seventeenth century.¹²

In the culturalist analysis, religious Hindu identity has an ontological existence and therefore does not call for an explanation. The communal conflict will continue to beset India since the state underestimates the strength of these real religious and cultural identities. However, the assumption of a pre-existing Hindu identity is belied by the evidence that Hindu identity often appears to be contingent on different social circumstances, at times playing a prominent role, or at others, disappearing altogether. In the 1960s, for example, the main politically relevant identities in the subcontinent were largely shaped by linguistic divides rather than religious affiliation. Even recent ideologies of Hindutva have proven to be unstable. The Ayodhya Ram Mandir (temple) issue, for example, was not equally appealing in all regions of India. From 1993 it became less prominent and was only revived in 2002, a decade later. Moreover, if a Hindu identity is latent and natural, why was its appeal, for such a long period, largely limited to upper castes and to urban middle-class Hindus? Even from a culturalist approach, it would be plausible to suggest that

¹¹ Ashish Nandy, ‘The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance’, in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 84. Also see T. N. Madan, ‘Whither Indian Secularism?’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1993, pp. 680–2; Partha Chatterjee, ‘Secularism and Tolerance’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 July 1994, pp. 1768–77. For an analysis and critiques of these positions see, Achin Vanaik, *The Furies of Indian Communalism*, London: Verso, 1998, pp. 150–62, 187–205; Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in Days of Hindutva’, *Social Scientist*, vol. 21, no. 3–4, March–April 1993, pp. 32–68; Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and Its Critics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹² See, for example, Tapan Basu et al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993, pp. 72–3; Amartya Sen, ‘The Threats to Secular India’, *New York Review of Books*, 8 April 1993.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

Hindutva has no relevance to the multiple expressions of religious faith that have historically been intrinsic to Hinduism. Indeed, Hindutva ideology homogenises the plurality of traditions and cultures in a similar manner to that which its spokesmen accuse secularism of doing.

Materialist analyses focus on the social, economic and political aspects of communalism. In this approach communal identities are constructed. Some scholars identify Hindutva's social backbone in the urban, educated middle class, or the upper-caste component of the urban petty bourgeoisie. Both groups feel threatened by the political and economic mobilisation of the lower castes.¹³ These analyses have explanatory value, but they do not provide a full account of the mechanisms by which social and economic processes lead to communalism, especially when economic factors cannot account fully, in themselves, for communal conflicts. Another explanation suggests that the predatory commercialisation and capitalism that developed in India, and their effects upon poor Muslims and Hindus, made them prone to communal violence. It contends that the insecurity of the poor, the overcrowded conditions of most cities and the competition for valuable urban space, which can be divided and re-divided for profit, create a fertile ground for 'major communal conflagration'.¹⁴ Yet, the urban poor are not the fomenters of communal conflicts.

Materialist-instrumentalist explanations ascribe the formation of a Hindu identity to strategies adopted by politicians and political parties for their own particular purposes. Some writers focus on the Hindu turn of the Congress Party, from which the BJP profited, and view the rise of Hindu militancy as a result of the transformation of secular politics in India by a process of communal polarisation. They highlight the effects of the tactics of political elites who emphasise religious differences in order to gain popular support.¹⁵ Although political stratagems certainly

¹³ See, for example, Tapan Rayachaudhri, 'Shadows of the Swastika: Historical Reflection on the Politics of Hindu Communalism', *Contention*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1995, p. 154; Vinay Lal, 'Hindu "Fundamentalism" Revisited', *Contention*, vol. 4, no. 2, Winter 1995, pp. 169–70; Ashish Nandy *et al.*, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 101; Sujata Patel, 'Urbanization, Development and Communalisation of Society in Gujarat', in Takashi Shinoda (ed.), *The Other Gujarat*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2002, pp. 207–15; Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 252–7.

¹⁴ Amiya Bagchi, 'Predatory Commercialisation and Communalism in India', in Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: Ayodhya and the Rise of Communal Politics in India*, London: Zed Books, 1991, pp. 210–11.

¹⁵ See Paul Brass, 'Elite Groups Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity among the Muslims of South Asia', in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp (eds.), *Political Identity in South Asia*, London: Curzon Press, 1979, p. 41; Brass, 'Ethnic Groups and the State', in Brass (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and the State*, Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985, pp. 1–56; Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Hindu Fundamentalism and the Structural Stability

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

play a role in the growth of communalism, this approach is limited by its instrumentalist logic. It takes for granted rather than explains how leaders convince significant numbers of people to do as they are told, and as a result presumes people to be inherently passive.¹⁶ By focusing on high-level politics this approach neglects the different forces in the society and the wider social meaning and implications of political processes, and frequently depends on the claim, for example, that some groups are culturally prone to violence. In this way materialist explanations rely on categories and presumptions that underlie the culturalist view.

In their efforts to address the problem of communal conflicts and violence, some scholars within the materialist approach developed state-oriented explanations for their growth. These analyses view the state and the politically dominant as the agents of both communal conflicts and Hindu patterns of politicisation. For instance, they explain the growth of communalism as the consequence of the institutional decline of the state. But they often also attribute a centrality to social disorder in the process of the state's degeneration.¹⁷ These arguments are tautological. Another variety of state-oriented explanations suggests that communal violence and its scale is the result of manipulations by political elites and the state. 'The persistence of riots helps local, state and national leaders of different persuasions in capturing or maintaining institutional and state power by providing convenient scapegoats, and alleged perpetrators of the events, and by providing as well dangers and tensions useful in justifying the exercise of state authority.'¹⁸ This position claims that communal riots are

of India', in Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalism and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies and Militance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 233–55; Rajni Kothari, *Politics and the People*, Vol. II, Delhi: Ajanta, 1990, pp. 440–79. Steven Wilkinson examines the relations between the occurrence of communal riots, as well as the state's efforts to stop them, and electoral incentives at the town and state level. See Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 4–9, 137–71.

¹⁶ Also see a discussion on this point in, James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity', *International Organization*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2000, p. 846; Amrita Basu, 'Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy? The Puzzle of Hindu Nationalism', in David Ludden (ed.), *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 56.

¹⁷ See Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Sumantra Bose suggests 'an organic crisis' of the Indian state in facilitating the rise of Hindu nationalism. Sumantra Bose, 'Hindu Nationalism' and the Crisis of the Indian State: A Theoretical Perspective', in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds.), *Nationalism, Democracy and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 104–64. For a critique of arguments about the weakness of state institutions as a cause for failing to prevent communal riots see Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*, pp. 85–96.

¹⁸ Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 6–7. Brass defines 'an institutionalized riot system', which works 'to keep a town or city in a permanent state of awareness of Hindu–Muslim relationship', *ibid.*, p. 284. Brass

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

manoeuvred by elites and persons and groups that specialise in producing riots, while at the same time insisting that communal violence became 'endemic in India'.¹⁹ Furthermore, while assuming that disorder and violent conflicts are intrinsic to India, this explanation nevertheless suggests that these conflicts can be managed and controlled. State and political elites do play a role in energising communal conflicts. But state-oriented explanations are limited by their narrow focus on electoral politics and political strategies for coalition building. They explain and understand social events from above, looking at them through the state, or the political elites, and subsequently deprive social groups of agency. In the cases when these explanations do attribute agency to society, they are often constrained by the presumptions that they hold about the state and the society, such as its proneness to violence.

Conversely, an approach that focuses on social networks and civic associations links the occurrences of communal riots to the existence or absence of associations and networks of civic engagement between the communities in strife. 'Where such networks of engagement exist, tensions and conflicts were regulated and managed; where they are missing, communal identities led to endemic and ghastly violence.'²⁰ In this society-centred approach communal riots are understood in isolation from the state, even though the state's basic role is to maintain law and order. Consequently, in this analysis the onus for maintaining communal peace is laid on the society, specifically on prominent members of social groups and civic organisations. Neither state-oriented nor society-centred approaches account for the complex patterns of reciprocal relations between the various state institutions and the society.

Some scholars understand the communal predicament as the effect of the homogenising pressures of the modern state.²¹ In one view, colonial policies and their assumptions about the nature of the society in

further develops this analysis in a seminal study of Hindu-Muslim violence, conducted over more than four decades of field study in Aligarh, in Uttar Pradesh. See Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, London: University of Washington Press, 2003, pp. 32–3, 258. Wilkinson argues that electoral incentives determine whether state governments will prevent communal violence, suggesting that in a state with a high degree of party fractionalisation, wherein the government relies on minority votes, it will prevent riots. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*, pp. 137–40.

¹⁹ Brass, *Theft of an Idol*, p. 6; *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, p. 9.

²⁰ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, p. 9. Also see p. 265.

²¹ Sudipta Kaviraj, for instance, looks at the logic of modernity's reconstitution of identities in order to understand the relations between religion and political processes in India. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Religion, Politics and Modernity', in U. Baxi and B. Parekh (eds.), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*, Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995, pp. 295–316.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

purely communal or religious terms created, constructed and promoted an imperative of animosity between Hindus and Muslims.²²

In the golden mean approach, scholars tried to reconcile both culturalist and materialist analyses, by identifying mechanisms by which the 'naturalness' of religious identities is produced by political processes.²³ From one viewpoint, the formation of a Hindu identity and the rise of Hindu nationalism are explained through a hybrid approach that combines three 'strategies', which prospered in the 1980s as the result of propitious conditions. First, Hindu identity is formed as a result of a process of stigmatisation and emulation that is based on the 'threatening Other', on stereotypes of the Muslim and on Hindu feelings of inferiority and vulnerability.²⁴ Hindus imitated and assimilated those cultural traits from which the Muslim–Other were believed to have derived their strength, in order to resist the Other, to rediscover those traits in their own culture, and to regain the self-esteem they had lost with the passing of the Golden Age.²⁵ The aspiration of Hindu nationalists, for instance, to build immense temples that would function as common meeting places, as mosques are thought to do, is an example of this process of imitation and assimilation. Second, Hindu nationalism has also been an instrument in the hands of elites who manipulate Hindu symbols. Third, its growth has been the result of party-building and organisation of the Hindu forces.

Explaining Hindu militancy, even partly, by the character of a collective Hindu psyche and its complex of vulnerability in relation to other defined collectives is problematic.²⁶ It assumes that such an organic collective exists in the first place. Yet, it is scarcely credible to speak of a homogenous community psyche that is cut off from its sociogenesis, or to assume, rather than explain, the 'Freudian short cut' that some of

²² See Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Colonial Construction of "Communalism"', in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 94–132; Aditya Mukherjee, 'Colonialism and Communalism', in Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: Ayodhya and the Rise of Communal Politics in India*, London: Zed Books, 1991, pp. 164–78. Part of the analysis in this book also examines the role of state policies and their discourses to understand the growth of communalism in the 1980s.

²³ Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, London: University of California Press, 1994, p. 7; Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement, and Indian Politics 1925–1990s*, Delhi: Viking, 1996, p. 5.

²⁴ See Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, pp. 1–10, 359, 400, 410.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Also see a similar line of argument in Ashish Nandy's discussion on the meeting between east and west in the context of British colonialism. Ashish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993; Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, Conflict*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996, pp. 154–5, 157, 166.

²⁶ See the analysis by Sudhir Kakar, 'Some Unconscious Aspects of Ethnic Violence in India', in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 135–45; Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86513-5 - Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat

Ornit Shani

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction

these scholars take from the individual to the society. Moreover, although this approach recognises the material aspects of the question, it takes the cultural traits of large social collectives for granted, and in this respect becomes indistinguishable from culturalist arguments and tends to be ahistorical. Finally, the proposition that Hindu militancy can be the outcome of a matter of consciousness, a state of mind, implies that it stands outside social interaction. In this way consciousness attains an essentialist status.

Culturalist and golden mean approaches to the rise of communal conflicts and the formation of a Hindu identity since the 1980s employ different emphases, but they share essentialist assumptions about the society, particularly that there is a cultural essence. Even materialist explanations that emphasise the processes of the construction of communalism rather than its ontological nature ultimately dwell on essentialist assumptions. The various approaches remain within a purview of an almost fundamental divide, and often inherent antagonism, between Hindus and Muslims. The explanations that acknowledge the construction and instability of communal identities fail to attend to the processes that explain how communal identities change, without relying on assumptions about the cultural essence of groups or without depriving agency from people. In their final account, therefore, the various approaches inevitably arrive at a predicament of endemic violence that derives from groups' cultural traits. These analyses do not account for caste as a factor in the growth of communalism.

While Hindu nationalism gained power and communal violence between Hindus and Muslims intensified, there was also a considerable increase in caste conflicts around redistributive policies for the lower and backward caste Hindus, particularly over the reservations of places in educational institutions and government jobs.²⁷ Moreover, conflicts between the forward and backward castes sometimes appeared to be closely linked with communal tensions. Either they occurred at the same time, or, at a more complex level, caste conflicts turned into communal violence. This happened in Gujarat in 1985 and at an all-India level in 1990. This book explores the relationships between caste conflicts, particularly over redistributive policies and the rise of communalism.

The coincidence of the rise of communal violence with the growth of caste conflicts seems paradoxical. While militant Hinduism assumes and

²⁷ Agitations and social protests against the reservation of quotas for the lower- and backward-caste Hindus in government jobs and educational institutions took place from the end of the 1970s and particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.