Introduction

This book is about the work and influence of the media on the career of Hindu nationalist mobilization in India during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It examines the unfolding of the Ram Janmabhumi, or Birthplace of Ram movement, which brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, or Indian People's Party) into political prominence. It discusses, among other things, the pre-publicity given to the movement's chief symbols via a national broadcast of the Ramayan, a serialized Hindu epic; the promotion carried out by Hindu nationalists through publicity images and through fashioning political participation on consumer choice rather than ideological commitment per se; the attention given the movement by a language-divided print media; television viewers' own readings of the Ramayan serial; and the structured misperceptions of non-resident supporters in the U.S. In arguing that Hindu nationalism's recent salience depended on and worked itself out through the media, I neither uncover nor confirm any simple causal mechanisms of media effect. Instead, I argue that the media re-shape the context in which politics is conceived, enacted, and understood. Hindu nationalism represented an attempt to fashion a Hindu public within the nexus of market reforms and the expansion of communications, rather than religious reaction as such.[1] Focusing on the moment of its emergence clarifies the historical conditions for the transition to a new visual regime, as it were, and at the same time shows the extent to which this emergence cannot be explained with reference to purely material circumstances.[2] That is, it illuminates the power of a given cultural form, and the ways in which this rests on a series of contingent events.

I suggest that Hindu nationalists in recent times represented an attempt to create a populist language of politics, appealing to authoritarian rather than democratic values.[3] It attempted to restructure the forms of public affiliation through a logic of commodification to expand

admittance beyond elite groups. Hindu nationalism's rise was concurrent with the unraveling of a consensus that had prevailed during the post-independence years. In the assumptions underlying this consensus, now dubbed "Nehruvianism" after its chief architect, Jawaharlal Nehru, there was a clear hierarchy ordering the realms of politics, economy, and society. Developmental policies conceived in the political realm were going to spur economic growth, thereby modernizing society. Influence was assumed to flow in one direction, from top to bottom. As developmental plans began to bear fruit, however, such an orderly vision of progress became increasingly difficult to maintain. As market reform found its enthusiasts in India, political opponents eventually began to contest the benign (or not-so-benign) authoritarianism through which economic policy was legislated, and which had survived more than four decades of democratic elections. At the same time, new electronic media set up circuits of communication across the realms (of polity, economy, and culture) that state planning sought to compartmentalize. This allowed Hindu nationalism to fashion a range of different rhetorics outside the political sphere proper, and to suggest a homology between forms of consumption and voting behavior, and between cultural identification and the requirements of electoral affiliation. Thus Hindu nationalists worked through commodity images and the partial, shifting affiliation of the novitiate and the sojourner as much as it relied on the commitment of the dedicated convert. In the process, Hindu nationalism sought to bypass the more slow and arduous process of extending its traditional base and of working through the contradictions between its own political positions and those of the different social groups it embraced. Instead, access was declared open to all who would consent to utilize the language being offered. A highly particularistic set of rituals and symbols was brought into a more abstract sphere where they each served to assert *Hindutva*, "Hinduness," without regard to their varying, context-dependent meanings.[4] Paying attention to the language of politics offers a way of contesting the stereotype of Hindutva as a separable and aberrant phenomenon somehow existing apart from the mainstream of national politics. At the same time, it draws attention to the wider cultural and political-economic context within which Hindutva gained influence. As communication systems expand, political participation expands as well, and demands meaningful explanation beyond notions of ideological domination or, for that matter, primordial resurgence.[5]

Hindu nationalism, in fact, became politically conspicuous in the

context of economic liberalization and in relation to it. The rhetoric of market reform and that of an insurgent cultural politics went public together, and interacted to express a new historical conjuncture. Both militated against a *dirigiste* status quo and promised radical change if hidden social forces were emancipated, whether of the profit motive or of a long-suppressed Hindu religion. Both drew on market forces energized in the process of liberalization, on the support of middle classes asserting their newly legitimated right to consume and of business groups seeking a successor to a developmentalist regime in eclipse. The onset of liberalization was not a purely economic process, but involved a shift in perception over time (roughly, 1987–93) and a new set of criteria of judgment. Earlier, it had been self-evident that state investment was required in a poor, developing economy, and that the private sector could neither be the main source nor the leading beneficiary of developmental efforts. Now the inefficiency of state intervention and the anodyne character of private enterprise became obvious. There was no causal relation between economic reforms and Hindutva, nor any inherent shared logic. Rather, there was an opportunistic alliance between them, as aspiring middle classes and business elites and a party till recently at the margins of political life sought to maximize their presence. Hindu symbolism had not been absent from public life by any means, but its presence now took on a different, and to many, sinister, meaning, signifying a claim to rule public space and brooking no challenges to its dominion.

Liberalization and Hindu nationalism shared their technologies of transmission for expanding markets and audiences respectively. If their messages and their adherents overlapped or crossed over, it was not necessarily out of conscious design, although design was not absent. Rather, it signaled the influence of the means and methods of communication at work, promoting popular participation without requiring popular control. In a sense, new means of communication generate a new kind of power, one that becomes more intelligible when we examine the work of television as a socio-technical apparatus.

TELEVISION'S POWER: THEORETICAL PREMISES

In this section, I propose to try and understand the workings of television, first as a medium per se, and then in terms of its influence in a country like India. In most critical accounts, television is understood in terms of its ideological power, by virtue of the ruling order it springs

from, and in terms of the ideas it helps circulate. A certain abstraction characterizes these arguments, so that domination occurs without viewers being aware of it, and despite the fact that viewers' own experience of television (including that of critics) does not imply such an outcome. Any adequate analysis of television must address this omission.

As a medium, television's work is parallel to and interlinked with that of the economy. Both disseminate information to help circulate goods as well as to socialize members of society.[6] Television is thus active in the material and symbolic reproduction of capitalist relations. Todd Gitlin has pointed out that just as, under capitalism, the surplus value accumulated in social labor is privately appropriated, men and women are estranged from the meanings they produce socially; these are privately appropriated by mass media and returned to them in alienated forms.[7] But the sense of exploitation that inhabits the workplace is absent before television. There is a sense rather of viewing as an autonomous act, done on one's own time. This experience of autonomy is an indivisible part of television's effect, and must be incorporated in any understanding of the medium's power.

Raymond Williams' work on the medium as both "technology and cultural form" points to its dual character, and offers the concept of "flow" as a means of specifying television's distinctness.[8] At one level, the term refers to program composition as a sequence of unrelated items, governed by broadcasting rather than audience interests. As Williams points out, within the flow of television programming is embedded another flow, that of advertising, that appears on no published schedule and yet is the motor of the entire process; audiences are the creation of an economic process designed to serve sponsors.[9] We can extend Williams' metaphor to what is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the technology, namely its ability to tether diverse temporal flows together.[10] Television audiences across society "tune in" to programs, their time of viewing flowing alongside but separate from the time of the image.[11] Although they inhabit the same space in clock time, as lived duration they are not the same. Thus the packaging of audiences for sale to sponsors and the use of ratings to signal popularity may both occur without the knowledge or consent of viewers, and indeed are thereby more effectively achieved. At the same time, viewers can entertain programs at their leisure, unconstrained by any authority the messages might claim for themselves.

Television yokes together different temporalities in one communi-

cative event. Electronically mediated messages from diverse and far-ranging sources, often at best partially related to viewers' own experiences, tend to lack the relatively deeper, more situated meanings of oral or print culture. This indexes a thinning of time, hence meaning, experienced as a reduction of social control, and as relative freedom. Yet the experience of communication, as Marshall McLuhan correctly describes it, is of participation and sociality, and a tactile sense of being "in touch," regardless of the content communicated.[12] The existence of an ongoing stream of communication shared by others engenders a sense of intimacy across social boundaries, as Claude Lefort has suggested.[13] Thus on the one hand, television offers respite from the compulsions of actually existing social relations, creating a space of temporary immunity from the inhibitions and proscriptions they would impose on any member. On the other hand, it evokes feelings of closeness and reciprocity to unknown participants who may exist only in imagination.

There is a contradictory character to this process. Although television operates within the logic of capitalist exchange, the implicit logic of audiences' own transactions, I suggest, is better understood in terms of anthropological discussions of gift exchange; the experience of communication is one of connection more than of alienation. Communication systems, in fact, impute the sense of an intimacy across society, and presume the existence of an ongoing social connection independent of audience response. The terms in which this connection is experienced, however, do not entail the costs or obligations through which social interaction otherwise occurs. It thus represents a distinct kind of gift exchange. The indefinite time interval between the reception of programming and viewers' own "counter-gift," of talking back to others, to the medium or its sponsors, infuses this gift with the sense of being truly "free," and imposing none of the compulsion customary with gift exchange. This temporal structure serves as an instrument of denial, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown, allowing a subjective truth (of sociality) to exist alongside a contrary, objective truth (of the absence of reciprocity, i.e., of the impossibility of talking back to a monological medium).[14]

Gift and commodity exchange are always implicated in each other; neither ever exists by itself in a pure sense. No commodity transaction is purely instrumental; there is always a sense of reciprocity involved; similarly any exchange of gifts always has an element of calculation in it. Television does something distinct to this entanglement. It invokes the logic of the gift within the private space secured by commodity exchange. The experiences of gift and commodity exchange can hence be

separated, and thereby imagined as separate as well. As Marcel Mauss argued, the symbolic existence of a gift economy remains crucial as the underpinning of a capitalist economy.[15]

The private space of reception enables the imagining of a "free" engagement with media messages, and the latter thus become open to imaginative reconstruction. Audiences can thus imagine new communities of sentiment, in fantasies of complete acceptance where the disciplining presence of other minds can be made to retreat, so entailing none of the usual costs of social membership. At the same time, this newly crafted autonomy provides them the critical distance with which it is possible to reflect on society itself as an external object of thought, independent of their own place in it.[16]

As Arjun Appadurai has argued, the imagination has an unprecedented provenance in contemporary society, due in part to the media.[17] I suggest that we can locate the present-day salience of the imagination, as well as the forms it takes, in the context of media and markets, and at the intersection of commodity exchange and the affective economy of the gift. Pre-existing understandings are of course inadequate to grasp the ways in which social relations are transformed by new and widening circuits of exchange. Moreover, if audiences feel independent of prevailing constraints, they can imagine themselves within altogether new kinds of associations that arise from, but do not in any simple way reflect, the market conditions of their existence. If media and markets have typically been conceived as advance guards of modernization and secularism, my analysis here indicates why their political outcomes might lead in unpredictable directions. Crucially, any elite-led process of development must confront the irreducible and indeed mushrooming existence of popular affiliations that a medium like television provokes, and acknowledge the new "communities of sentiment" it may give rise to.[18]

Any critical analysis of the work of television therefore entails sifting through historical assumptions that may carry over when transposing a theory from one society to another. In theories of media and politics, assumptions about the character of politics in a modern, democratic society are most prominent, in this respect. Whether politics pertains to the realm of civil order or to that of the state, it exists to a great extent through the means of communication. With electronic media, the institutionalized production and circulation of images and symbols displaces and transforms the boundaries of the political sphere, and reshapes the flows of information society depends on. This is partly a result of the particular technical characteristics of electronic media, but

principally, it appears as a feature confirming principles of modern democratic society.

Among the shifts and transformations understood as constitutive of modernity is the decline of a sphere of transcendental authority, of the rule of kings by divine right and of the claims of a supramundane religious realm over temporal life. A secular discourse of politics takes its place, deriving its strength not from theological sources but from society itself. In the West, politics is thereby held to be excluded from the sphere of the church; if we consider democracy as the political form emblematic of modernity, it is thereafter determined by appeals to the history, culture, and needs of the people. Normatively, the space of politics merges with the space of the social. It is customary to locate the emergence of the mass media in the context of this shift from theological to worldly authority, operating as an institutional underpinning of modern society, and helping to secure a certain ideological unity across it.[19] The growth of literacy and of reading publics in the wake of the print media, succeeded by electronic media and the enormous expansion of communication, secure the establishment of a secular, democratic society, in the standard rendition of this argument.[20]

What if the media are introduced before the rationalization of politics and the "disenchantment" of society? In a country like India, the classic assumptions of liberal politics have been refashioned first by the colonial and then by the developmentalist state. The colonial state suppressed the growth of literacy and maintained a limited English educated middle class for administrative purposes. With independence, a tacit divide continued between a literate elite and mass audiences, with the press catering largely to the former, and the film industry winning a large popular following. The broadcast media, which were under state monopoly, formed a tentative bridge across this divide, and aired mainly Indian films and clips of film song sequences. Institutional constraints (chiefly, the difficulty of attracting audiences with bureaucratic staff) combined with political restrictions (e.g., the absence of competition, foreign or domestic, and the attempt to minimize religious programming) preserved the gulf between elite and mass media, and made it difficult for broadcasting to realize its promise of fostering popular education or participation in any significant way. The arrival of satellite television and the dismantling of state controls, however, brought market forces and the power of television together by 1992. By this time, political opportunism had brought religious programming onto state-controlled television and created what did emerge as a distinctive Indian

programming genre, namely, mythological soap operas, the successor to the government's failed experiment in developmental soap operas.[21] Meanwhile, unlike in the West, print audiences were expanding, not diminishing, even as television audiences grew. Thus as Hindu nationalism sought to gain momentum, it could appeal to a base of educated intelligentsia even while generating popular participation through audio-visual and direct mobilization.[22] Here we have a model of politicization that cannot be dismissed as aberrant and/or fundamentalist, but requires explanation in its own terms, acknowledging the complex consequences of what Trotsky called combined and uneven development, while tracking the movements of capital and images and assessing their effects.[23]

Attempts to illuminate the forms of politicization while factoring in the context of uneven development are, regrettably, rare in media studies, and any suggestions I can offer are necessarily provisional and incomplete. In that spirit, and by way of offering a set of coordinates for my project's methodological underpinnings, I will cite the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci, intellectuals who have rather different understandings of their work but nevertheless converge in some important respects.[24] Bourdieu exemplifies the social scientist in his value-neutrality, proceeding by way of objectifying objectivism, and academicism itself, while Gramsci is insistent that socio-political analysis acquires significance only when underwriting "initiatives of will" aimed at "points of least resistance" in tactical political operations.[25] But they share a certain agnosticism towards the ruling pieties of their vocations (sociologist and Communist Party theoretician respectively), rejecting the notion that a given mode of thought determines the forms of being it claims to represent, and so exercise a more grounded and pragmatic approach in analysis. Thus Bourdieu's formulations on practice, and on the rules of transformation of practice as it moves from one social realm to another complements Gramsci's emphasis on the fluid, shifting, and internally contradictory nature of political regimes, class coalitions, and of consciousness itself. Bourdieu assumes the existence of relatively autonomous fields, and frames the concept of capital as something like the energy of a social physics. Hence capital infuses and empowers the social metabolism, taking dissimilar forms in different fields but serving in each field as the site of its distinctive form of power:

> The theory of strictly economic practices is a particular case of a general theory of the economy of practices. Even when they give every appearance of disinter-

estedness because they escape the logic of "economic" interest (in the narrow sense) and are oriented towards non-material stakes that are not easily quantified, as in "pre-capitalist" societies or in the cultural sphere of capitalist societies, practices never cease to comply with an economic logic. The correspondences which are established between . . . the different kinds of capital and the corresponding modes of circulation, require us to abandon the economic/non-economic dichotomy which makes it impossible to see the science of "economic" practices as a particular case of a science capable of treating all practices, including those that are experienced as disinterested or gratuitous, and therefore freed from the "economy," as economic practices aimed at maximizing material or symbolic profit.[26]

Universalized commodity production and exchange permits us to see through the fiction of social groupings and cultural standards that constitute themselves as autonomous and aloof from worldly corruptions, and to point to the "bottom line" calculations that cut across their various manifestations. However, as Bourdieu argues, to depend exclusively on an economistic approach misses the real and important differences between social fields, which constitute their diverse forms of capital *as* capital, and ignores the transformations allowing the movement of this capital from one field to another. He therefore distinguishes between economic and symbolic capital, with the latter itself taking many different forms. Symbolic capital, he suggests, depends for its value on being perceived as not economic, as a form of social esteem that derives from other sources. The labor through which symbolic capital is accumulated, Bourdieu argues, includes that of disguising the potential for its conversion into economic capital, and without this additional labor, symbolic capital would lose its distinctive character.[27]

While Bourdieu provides an elegant model for framing key aspects of the social process at work here, there is the risk that his analysis merely replicates the work of capital in homogenizing and unifying diverse cultural domains.[28] One way of resisting this homogenization is to point to the multiple forms of exchange, affective and instrumental both, that co-exist, e.g., of gift and commodity. To stay here with Bourdieu's own terms of analysis, however, we may observe that he ignores the two-fold nature of value constitutive of capital. As Marx has argued, value can be understood as being comprised of use value and exchange value.[29] The former is specific to the purposes for which a commodity is employed and hence non-transferable, while the latter signifies the social relation of equivalence established between commodities, that enables the circulation and the accumulation of capital. Considering value only at an abstract level omits a consideration of the diverse concrete needs

represented in specific uses, without whose interpretive elaboration we cannot understand how exchange value, i.e., capital, is accumulated.

Here Todd Gitlin's emphasis on the similarity between meaning and value is insightful. Meaning, like value, can be understood as having a two-fold character. Without inquiring into the specific meanings of an event for the different actors in a circuit of communication, any account of the messages in circulation would be incomplete. The inseparability of communicative and economic processes is emphasized in such an approach. There is no economic process without representations of itself; indeed this is what renders relations of production as social relations.

Stuart Hall's schema of "encoding/decoding," modeled on the circuit that the commodity itself travels, offers a powerful model for thinking about media communication. It points to the complex series of transformations, of (message) production, distribution, consumption, and reproduction which, taken together, represent an entire social process at work. Arguing that the media message is a commodity, but a distinct form of commodity, Hall points out that it is produced within a shared context of social understandings by broadcasters, consumed by audiences, re-incorporated and reproduced as part of a collective pool of ideas and meanings. Meanings "preferred" by broadcasters tend to be "negotiated" in audience readings, and subsumed in their larger world-view; "oppositional" readings however resist such an easy incorporation, and potentially complicate this process of reproduction, Hall has argued.[30] A limitation here, however, is (what has been called) Hall's conveyor-belt approach to communication, with the "preferred meaning" of the broadcast message moving serially through the different stages of the circuit. Such an approach assumes that the moments of encoding and decoding are or should be homologous, whereas in fact the difference between them is characteristic of mass communication.[31] The underlying problem is Hall's assumption that the circuit of production/communication is reproduced; this renders meaning ornamental to an inexorable process of system maintenance. But this is not possible if we consider the circuits of use and exchange value both (rather than that of exchange alone), involving meanings "preferred" by broadcasters as well as "non-preferred" meanings, and the interaction and resultant of these circuits. Other social processes are set in motion that complicate any narrowly defined process of reproduction.[32]

Furthermore, the power of commodities in capitalism rests not simply in their value, but depends also on the labor required to turn this value