

POLITICS AFTER  
TELEVISION

*Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*

ARVIND RAJAGOPAL



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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page vii</i>
Introduction	I
Television's power: theoretical premises	3
The Ram Temple movement, the BJP, and a fissured public	12
Varieties of nationalism	20
Overview	24
1 Hindu nationalism and the cultural forms of Indian politics	30
In the throes of economic crisis: liberalization/"Hinduization"	35
Passive revolution and the unraveling of a fragile consensus	43
The Hindu nationalist combine	51
The non-committed voter and the retailing of Hindu identity	63
2 Prime time religion	72
State sponsorship in the commerce of images	75
Situating contemporary uses of an epic tradition	86
Televising a lost utopia: ancient science, benign oppression, and a proto-modern state	99
Old symbols in a new language of politics	117
3 The communicating thing and its public	121
Television and the restructuring of popular and domestic space	123
Television and the transformation of the context of politics	135
Narratives of community: the effects of going public	147
4 A "split public" in the making and unmaking of the Ram Janmabhumi movement	151
The Indian press: government, language, and politics	156
A hall of mirrors: the BJP's print media strategy	171
The Ram Janmabhumi campaign as a managed event	187
Language-divided print media as a strategic resource	208

5	Organization, performance, and symbol	212
	Performing the movement	216
	Yoking symbols and propaganda	224
6	Hindutva goes global	237
	The figure of the “NRI”	239
	Syndicated Hinduism: crafting identity across diversity	244
	Self-making and immigrant cultures in the U.S.	254
	Expatriate nostalgia and Hindu nationalism	263
	Conclusion	271
	How has television changed the context of politics in India?	277
	Appendix: Background to the Babri Masjid dispute	284
	<i>Notes</i>	292
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	372
	<i>Index</i>	390

## CHAPTER I

### *Hindu nationalism and the cultural forms of Indian politics*

The Ramayan epic was serialized on national television in India from January 1987 to August 1989. During the broadcast, the Ram Janmabhumi (Birthplace of Ram) movement, which aimed to demolish a mosque, Babri Masjid (Babur's mosque) in Ayodhya and build a Ram temple in its place, grew in importance. The Ramayan serial overlapped with the most crucial phase of the Janmabhumi movement, when it changed from an ominous but still relatively obscure campaign into the dominant issue before the country, one that made and unmade prime ministers and ruling parties.<sup>1</sup> The Ramayan achieved record viewership in virtually every part of the country (something no serial before it had done), and made Sunday mornings "belong" to it; any public event scheduled for that time courted disaster. With such publicity given to its pre-eminent symbol, the god-king Ram, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was emboldened to declare, by the middle of 1989, that the Ayodhya movement "had reached a state and status in Indian public life when it was no more possible to ignore its effect in politics, including electoral politics."<sup>2</sup> The issue was officially declared to be political, with the BJP making it their number one priority that "a grand temple to Lord Ram" would be built at the site of the mosque.

In the launching of one procession from Delhi to Ayodhya, Ram's birthplace, volunteers dressed to look like the television versions of Ram and his brother Lakshman, with their bows strung, posed for photographs in front of a pile of bricks intended for the proposed Ram temple, dubbed Ram *shilas*, using the Sanskrit *shila* for brick to underline that this was religious, not political work. Participants shouted slogans like *Saugandh Ram ki khaten hain, mandir wahin banayenge* (We swear by Lord Ram, we will build the temple there) and *Jis Hindu ka khoon na khaula, woh khoon nahin, pani hai* (the Hindu whose blood does not boil does not have blood but water). B. L. Sharma, general secretary of the Delhi unit of the Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad, declared, "The Hindu is up

in arms, the storm has risen, and nothing can stop it now.”<sup>3</sup> One VHP activist rallying volunteers declared, after a clash with police in Ayodhya: “What you are seeing today is a replay of the battle scenes you have witnessed on the television screen in the Mahabharat epic.<sup>4</sup> Only this time the fight is for who will win the throne of Lucknow and Delhi.”<sup>5</sup> Ashok Singhal, who led the mobilization, noted about the Ramayan serial, in an interview, “[I]t was a great gift to our movement. We owed our recruits to the serial’s inspiration.”<sup>6</sup> Mahant Avaidyanath, President of the Ram Janmabhumi Mukti Yagna Samiti (Committee to Liberate the Birthplace of Ram), speaking at a VHP meeting in Bangarmau, Unnao District, in U.P., observed that Ramanand Sagar had spread *prachar prasad*, auspicious publicity, for Lord Ram, and the VHP wished to do the same all across India.<sup>7</sup> Sequences in the serial itself seemed to make explicit reference to the VHP’s campaign, with Ram uttering prayers to a parcel of earth from his birthplace, a novel interpolation in the story.<sup>8</sup>

Battle scenes in a tele-epic were seen as models for Hindu militancy, and at the same time the serial itself began to echo themes from the movement (see chapter two). A historical conjuncture was in formation, one that had a kind of transparency: there was, for a while, the feeling of a great clarity about the character and causes of social problems and the nature of their solution, and these were similar in their simplicity and attractiveness. What drew little attention, amidst this great clarity, was the new prominence of the media itself, which as facilitator rather than unmoved mover, enabled a new order of social connectivity, in a visual regime that now extended across the nation. Ordinary citizens now perceived their actions as having implications for society at large, suggesting a new dimension to their perception, and a different quality to the power they wielded. Such widespread changes invested claims by the BJP and its affiliates about the re-birth of a Hindu public with an ominous force.

A new public language was emerging, more intimate to a section of the population and intimidating to the rest, that resonated with themes of collective empowerment, albeit in disquieting ways. This was of course not due simply to the broadcast of some television programs. Merely focusing on the media itself does little more than confirm our own fascination with its power. The media neither cause nor reflect events, they participate in them. To an important extent, television, like the media in general, exteriorize and consolidate the social functions of communication and representation, leading to a quicker, more efficient

network of signs and messages, and in turn changing the context for social communication in general. Communication now occurs at personal and societal levels simultaneously, in interlinked circuits. The things people use, as well as the ideas and images they receive, are increasingly part of a single circuit of consumption, enabling a new and more mutable style of collective representation. The quality and extent of popular consent and participation thus become immediate and pressing issues, changing the way in which politics is conducted.<sup>9</sup> The Ram Janmabhumi campaign made the most of the resulting volatility, drawing large numbers into a nationwide movement by combining symbols of Hindu religion with themes of popular empowerment and aggression against a stereotyped enemy, notably Muslims. The temple movement came to focus a wide-ranging set of political and economic claims by the Hindu nationalist party, in a determined and powerful challenge to the state to fulfill its obligation to society.

I will anticipate my argument here, and at the same time outline the chronology of events analyzed. The Ram Janmabhumi campaign, I suggest, can be seen as part of the third of three successive phases, each marking a growing crisis of the Indian State. They can be distinguished in terms of attempted resolutions to this crisis that recast the relation between political authority and citizen-subjects, through the systems of communication and the language of politics available. The first phase is that of “Nehruvianism,” beginning in 1947 and decisively concluding with the imposition of a National Emergency in 1975. Nehruvianism, a term retrospectively applied to the first decades of the post-independence period, is the name for the consensus undergirding the Indian developmental state, referring to a particular distribution of political power and its legitimating vision of secular, autarkic growth. During this period, the work of the economy was seen to stand for and be capable of resolving any problems that arose in the sphere of culture; technocracy was in fact the form of politics. Planning and policy were conceived from the “commanding heights” of the state, functioning for the most part at a remove from the ordinary language of people. Consequently the National Emergency in 1975 sought to close the gap between state authority and the people (including their representatives in opposition parties, labor unions, and other organizations), and to find an authoritarian solution to the problem of inducing political consent. Thus censorship was imposed on the press, and experiments to set up a nationwide television system commenced. The institution of the Emergency pointed to the beginning of the breakdown of the Nehruvian

consensus, although the restoration of democracy a mere two years later delayed recognition of this fact, and allowed the appearance of continuity. The experience of the Emergency suggested that consent could not be commanded and that force was no compensation for the lack of effective communication. This lesson was taken in not only by the ruling Congress party, but also by the Hindu nationalists who came to focus on popular mobilization, using the rhetoric of democratic politics and empowerment.

The phase of liberalization which began piecemeal in the 1980s, and then more decisively in 1991, was in many ways an acknowledgment that the inefficiencies of the economy had reached crisis proportions, and required not merely technical but political management. The press, largely captive to business interests, attacked state-led development as a wasteful and inefficient system nurturing stagnation and corruption rather than productivity. With scant regard for the historic dependence of indigenous big business on the state, privatization and *laissez faire* were euphorically endorsed as providing the answer to problems of the economy and, implicitly, as the guarantee of a more stable polity. There was a retreat from the certitude of the developmental state that had presumed knowledge only markets were now considered capable of, of how to match demand and supply while increasing both. The market's wisdom was enigmatic, however, appearing as a set of self-evident principles whose outcomes were in fact unpredictable. The difficulty was two-fold and rested in the state's inability to induce either a properly productive economy or the consent of its people, and these were now seen to be inter-related problems. Both the pedagogical role adopted in state policy, e.g., in broadcasting institutions, and the developmental role in economic planning, indicated an incongruity between a top-down mode of governance and a system of communication which called for a more reciprocal interaction. The problem of consent became an increasingly urgent one for the economy itself, in terms of incentives to produce and the willingness to consume.

It was in this nexus of circumstances that there arose a receptivity to the idea of a break from the past, one that Hindu nationalists capitalized on, although they did so, paradoxically, by claiming to return to a deeper, purer past. With a sophistication in communication far ahead of its competition, the BJP and its affiliates identified the opportunity presented by the growing numbers of "non-committed voters" due to the waning influence of the Congress Party. Crafting a range of appeals that converged in the single-issue temple campaign, Hindu nationalism



promised a pro-business government combined with strong nationalist discipline, in a solution whose hostility to the poor and to minorities may actually have enhanced its credibility with large sections of the middle classes. Hindu nationalism worked at two levels, on the one hand offering the cultural and ideological accompaniment to liberalization for middle and upper classes, and at the same time translating it into a religio-mythic narrative that would win popular consent (see below). The promotion of a 'Hindu' public, partial and contradictory as it was, was seen to be capable of addressing the crisis of political legitimation, so that both the Congress and the BJP would have to draw on it. Meanwhile this Hindu public helped distract attention from the limited and class-biased character of economic reforms that were being carried out.<sup>10</sup> The alliance between economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism was opportunistic and unstable, but nevertheless, in the context, developed a considerable force and momentum. Individual actions were declared to have a national relevance and a capacity to affect the body politic as a whole; participation in the temple campaign meant participation in making India Hindu (again). There was a homology between these arguments and those being made for the economic sphere. Production and consumption by individuals were deemed to be salient for the wealth of the nation as a whole, and indeed to be its aim and basis; similarly, the action of individuals, e.g., in Hindu nationalist processions, was the means of national self-realization. The motto publicized during the Emergency, "Be Indian, Buy Indian," was perhaps ahead of its time in its association of buying and national identity. Whether Indian goods were purchased or not, the definition of buying as patriotic came, during the early period of liberalization, to have an expanded, if ironic significance, as consumer expenditure was subsidized at the cost of a rising national debt.

In attempting to understand the influence of the economic crisis on ideology, it would be misleading to think that an empirical description of the economy alone would clarify matters. The conventional Marxist model of an economic base anchoring an ideological superstructure is only of partial help, I suggest, in comprehending the two-way interaction between these realms. Rather, the economy and ideology each has a specific form of materiality, in Balibar's terms, arising from their mode of production and mode of subjection respectively.<sup>11</sup> Each tells the story of the other, ideology that of the economy, and the economy that of ideology. The economy provokes ideology's effects, just as in turn, the kinds of subject positions, the narratives of economic action, the rela-

tionship of classes one to the other, portrayed in ideology turn out to influence and impel events in the economy. Thus, for instance, Nehruvianism told the story of state-led modernization, and in doing so expressed the paternalism of the developmentalist economy. In fact, the existence of a protected private sector, growing under the control of a license-permit raj, pointed to a more authoritarian and inegalitarian economic model, and so disclosed the elitist character of Nehruvian ideology. Similarly, the ideology of liberalization sponsored the introduction of market reforms and the rollback of an inefficient welfare state, while heralding expansive, unhindered growth. The ways in which economic reforms actually took shape, however, disclosed a system that was no longer merely elitist but, in fact, was rapidly aggravating class inequality, with a more arbitrarily interventionist state serving to protect these class gains. A brief examination of some of the events of liberalization will therefore shed light on the unacknowledged gaps in the narratives of liberalization and assist in the task of ideology critique.

IN THE THROES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS:  
LIBERALIZATION / ‘‘HINDUIZATION’’<sup>12</sup>

The Indian economy, in a famous quip by economist Raj Krishna, suffered from a ‘‘Hindu rate of growth’’ for decades after Independence – a ‘‘sluggish’’ 3 to 3.5 percent per annum between 1950 and 1980, which meant, given the rate of population growth at this time, a per capita growth rate of 1.4 percent per annum.<sup>13</sup> Embodied in the phrase is not only the economist’s old adage that growth is the chief goal of an economy, but also the self-deprecating characterization of this failure as ‘‘Hindu.’’ ‘‘Hindu’’ here was metonymic of India – ancient and out-of-date, too vast to be successfully influenced by mere mortals, and possessing in this intractability its own peculiar distinction. Yet the overriding feature of this distinctiveness was failure – its seeming incapacity to answer the needs of changing times. From being considered the glory of an old civilization, to be ‘‘Hindu’’ had become the unbudgeable burden of a backward nation attempting to be modern.

Yet in a matter of a few years, the meaning of the term changed completely. To be Hindu became a triumphant declaration of strength and vigor, and the symbol of an aggressive culture on the ascendant. Now it was those who had believed the term to signify anything else who were at fault – they were traitors to a great heritage who, by their unbelief, had paralyzed an incomparable civilization. In a criticism

symptomatic of the change, BJP economist Jay Dubashi declared, “It was not the Hindu Rate of Growth that failed India but the Nehru Rate of Growth and men like Raj Krishna are as much the guilty men as Nehru himself.”<sup>14</sup>

In the 1980s, the average annual growth rate was above 5 per cent, thereby “breaking the barrier of the Hindu growth rate,” declared a prominent business magazine.<sup>15</sup> “The last ten years have transformed not only the society and the economy, but also the psyche of the country,” it proclaimed. “[R]evered terms of the past are now *passé* – socialism, controls, state interference . . . One can easily sum up the decade by saying, ‘Long live democracy.’ Or if one wants to be more specific, ‘Long live liberalization’” (*ibid.*). There is journalistic hyperbole here, but the choice of rhetoric is itself revealing. With the lifting of socialism or state interference (the terms slide into each other, as in many such accounts), and the liberalization this implies, democracy springs forth, and psychic transformation proceeds. From being seen as a burden, events seemed to suggest that “Hinduism” too was a part of the repressed truth of society, released by the lifting of state controls and the mobilization of latent popular forces, although those espousing “Hinduness” insisted that much remained to be done.

Liberalization as such, involving structural reforms, was launched after July 1991 at the behest of the international lending agencies, following the government’s application for an emergency loan to cover its negative balance of payments. There were severe external constraints placed on the economy, in terms, for instance, of debt service and excise reductions on imports, opening more and more sectors of the economy to foreign competition, generating resources for investment when the state’s ability to collect revenue had new limits, addressing demands for full convertibility of the rupee and so on. Although reforms were externally imposed, the business classes as well as the political elites chose to present them as undertaken on their own initiative, and as a triumph of their own decisiveness in turning away from deleterious “big government” methods of running the economy. When it seemed that liberalization offered a means of quick expansion in a rapidly growing market, it was welcomed by businesses. When it began to be clear that foreign competition would enter as a necessary concomitant of any internal liberalization, the mood rapidly became more ambivalent, and the hitherto protected industrial houses began to demand a “level” playing field, something whose absence their prosperity had depended on.

The appeal of privatization built on a widespread disillusionment with the state, acquiring force when the state itself anointed private business as the new agent of progress and change. Although understood as the opposite of “state-owned,” “privatization” was justified not so much as a transfer of ownership and control as in terms of a change in the *nature* of control, seeking efficiency through competition. In practice, privatization was used to cover a range of scenarios, from creating a public limited company out of a government unit in Malaysia, to the setting up of a joint-sector enterprise in China, and the introduction of property rights in Hungary.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, privatization could be said to require a more, not a less effective state, one that held its players to a given set of regulations and maintained market discipline, to promote industrial efficiency and enhance production. Privatization’s promise of transparency could thus function to screen the specific agenda behind reforms, as a set of procedural norms benefiting a particular status quo. In the case of India, initial evidence pointed to the transfer of public resources to private ownership, and the protection of middle- and upper-class privileges, all enacted at the cost of the majority of the population.

Critics of the public sector were insistent that their privatization was a guaranteed solution to the government deficit. However, one analysis of the macroeconomic impact of public sector enterprises from 1960–61 to 1989–90 showed that their deficit did not increase significantly over the period, and that the growing fiscal drain was actually caused by growing expenditure and subsidies of administrative departments.<sup>17</sup> Simultaneously, those favoring a rollback of the state nevertheless held on to the need for force against the enemies of progress, to break militant unions, for instance, and to crush organized strikes, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

The economic reforms initiated by Indira Gandhi following her return to office in 1980 were taken further after her death by Rajiv Gandhi from 1985 onwards with his “New Economic Policy” (NEP). The NEP was designed to jump-start the stagnant industrial economy and stimulate domestic consumption, through tax concessions to high-income groups and to corporations, new government jobs and substantial salary increases at the upper echelons of the public sector. The second half of the 1980s witnessed a veritable explosion in the economy, with the consumer durable market alone growing at a rate of between 8 and 22 percent per annum in this period. The growth rate of the economy as a whole rose at the same time, averaging above 5 percent. Media pundits, bureaucrats, and politicians alike declared it only the

beginning of an extended period of growth, as a sleeping giant awoke to take its rightful place among the world's leading nations.<sup>19</sup> Within a year, the picture changed beyond recognition, and seemingly without warning. The World Bank issued a report in October 1990, advocating 20 percent devaluation in the rupee to help remedy the balance of payments. Non-Resident Indian deposits began to leave the country directly thereafter, with the capital flight totaling \$1.33 billion over the next eight months. By June 1991, exchange reserves reached an all-time low of two weeks' supply. The new minority Congress government, led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, soon sought IMF assistance.<sup>20</sup>

The causes of the crisis were not obscure. The extent of growth in the national debt during the 1980s was without parallel in the country's history. Commercial borrowing to serve what one economist called India's "ten per cent socialism," providing extra comforts for the fortunate few, soon reached its limit.<sup>21</sup> Non-essential governmental expenditures had grown unabated. Imports had outstripped exports for the entire duration of the post-independence period, with the exception of two years in the 1970s, with balance of payments crises recurring across the whole period.<sup>22</sup> The gross expenditure of the Central Government had risen from about Rs.178 billion in 1979–80 to Rs.220 billion in 1980–81 to Rs.820 billion in 1989–90.<sup>23</sup> Public and commercial debt had risen steeply to meet these expenditures, since taxes had also been cut and deficit financing had played a considerable role in underwriting the government budget. Interest payments of course led to further increases in public expenditure. The fiscal deficit reached 9 percent of GDP in 1986–87, the highest it had ever reached until then, and the rest of the decade saw no significant decrease from this figure. Import liberalization led to a considerable increase in the import surpluses supporting industrialization. With the decline in foreign concessional loans after the oil crisis of 1979–80, interest rates increased worldwide, and the average interest rate on the Indian debt rose from 2.4 to 6.1 percent between 1980 and 1982 alone. The period of maturity of loans was nearly halved between 1980 and 1989, from 40.8 to 24.4 years. Although these changed conditions meant that incurring external debt was a far more serious proposition than before, loans accumulated uninterruptedly, from \$18.7 billion in 1980 to \$56.3 billion in 1989, that is, from about 10.8 percent to 21.5 percent of GNP. By 1989, debt service as a percentage of exports of goods and services had risen to 26.3 percent, up from 9.1 percent in 1980.<sup>24</sup>

By 1987, India was seventh in the ranks of debtor nations. And in another four years, it had risen to third place, with a debt total of \$70 billion, surpassed only by Brazil (\$122 billion) and by Mexico (\$101 billion), and total debt service as a percentage of goods and services was of the order of 26 percent that year (1991).<sup>25</sup> At the end of 1990–91, the total internal debt amounted to 50.2 percent of the GDP; taken together with external debt, the total public debt at this time amounted to 62.9 percent of the GDP.<sup>26</sup>

IMF-imposed structural adjustment commenced, with its conditionalities including currency devaluation, opening the economy to imports, effecting cuts in subsidies, and initiating privatization, among other things. Those who had hitherto been the leading apostles of debt-induced growth soon became its most articulate critics, as they championed the new reforms imposed by the international institutions (e.g., Manmohan Singh, the Finance Minister between 1991 and 1996). If liberalization and privatization had already been words in vogue until this time, they attained the status of gospel truths, containing both diagnosis and cure.<sup>27</sup>

On 1 and 3 July 1991, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government devalued the rupee in two steps and promised to make the currency convertible within three to five years. Major reforms in trade policy were also made soon after. Twenty days later, the asset limit for firms listed under the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act was scrapped, along with industrial licensing for most projects, and the foreign equity limit was raised to 51 percent. The industrial policy was announced the same day that the union budget was presented in Parliament. In the annual budgets that followed, additional measures were announced to reduce the fiscal deficit, including divestment in state owned enterprises, promotion of foreign direct investment and portfolio investment by the state, and private sector participation in infrastructure (core) sectors like power, telecommunications, and roads.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the measures included the abolition of import control through licensing for capital goods, raw materials and intermediates, the reduction across the board of all import duties, and the liberalization of gold and silver imports. Divestment of up to 49 percent was allowed in select public sector enterprises, support was to be withdrawn from loss-making units, and a National Renewal Fund was announced, to help workers affected by industrial restructuring.<sup>29</sup>

Under the guise of divestment, public property accumulated over four decades of independence began to be given away at prices far

below their real cost, in an extraordinary and little-publicized raid on the treasury. Only investors capable of making bulk purchases of 20 to 50 million rupees were eligible to participate, ensuring that most people were excluded.<sup>30</sup> According to the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India, the first sale of shares of ten public sector units alone involved a loss of almost 400 percent per share on an average.<sup>31</sup> Thus shares of the Steel Authority of India (SAIL) with a market value of Rs.200 per share were sold at Rs.15, and Hindustan Petro Chemicals Limited (HPCL) shares valued at Rs.800 in the open market were sold at Rs.250. A former state Finance Minister, Ashok Mitra, estimated in 1992 that one lot of public sector shares that was sold in this fashion for Rs.30.38 billion could have fetched about five times as much if a fair market price had been sought.<sup>32</sup>

There were additional signs of the disparity between the triumphal rhetoric at this time and actual economic conditions. Amid all the austerity measures, and predictions that hundreds of thousands of workers could be laid off in public sector units, those at the managerial and executive levels faced no threat, and government servants themselves were nowhere affected. It was not only the urban middle classes who were protected from the brunt of rising prices. While announcing the removal of subsidies of fertilizers, farmers were assured that they would be compensated by excise reductions. Meanwhile, there was no mention of remedial measures for tackling the problems of the growing unemployed, including the educated unemployed.<sup>33</sup> Although the 1970s were a period of relatively low growth, the increase in employment was nearly twice that of the subsequent high growth decade of the 1980s. The average annual increase in employment declined from 2.82 percent between 1972–73 and 1977–78 to 2.22 percent from 1977–78 to 1983–84, and fell further to 1.55 percent from 1983–84 to 1987–88. The agricultural sector as well saw a decline in the growth rate of employment, from 2.32 percent in the 1972–78 period to 1.20 percent in the 1983–88 period.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the layoffs in government-owned organizations, private companies had been closing down industrial units, paying no heed to the Industrial Disputes Act that forbade such summary initiatives. Most large private companies, especially those controlled by multinationals, had been reducing their workforce for several years past, by offering “voluntary retirement” with improved benefits.<sup>35</sup> According to one estimate, nearly twenty million people were affected by the setback in poverty alleviation as a result of the reforms, and the number of

registered unemployed rose by more than 5 percent, or 1.7 million, between 1990–91 and 1991–92 to 36.6 million in February 1992.<sup>36</sup> One study determined that the proportion of household consumer expenditure devoted to food actually decreased between the early 1960s and the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> And the per capita availability of total foodgrain for consumption (defined as net output adjusted for net imports and net changes in stock) declined from 510 grams per days in 1991 to 465 grams per day in 1993.<sup>38</sup>

One economist, remarking on the absence of criticism of the harsh measures being taken at the IMF's behest, wrote:

We have already been more than accommodating in not only conceding to, but indeed adopting virtually each one of the conditionality requirements, with scant regard for [their] demonstrably harmful effects . . . and for the poor in particular. Yet there has been a tide of support for the IMF-dictated path of adjustment among the media, academics and other people that has seldom been witnessed before. Emboldened by the support of this influential group, the government has gone about implementing a broad package of reform measures to give the right signals to the IMF.<sup>39</sup>

This was no abstract economic process, but one with political assumptions and consequences. Yet there was a powerful consensus amongst elite groups, including those more often critical of government actions. What led to the apparent disenfranchisement of liberalization's critics was not any obvious success of the economic reforms as such. Rather, the terms of reference for understanding the economy and its relation to politics had shifted. It was as though a different set of conceptual coordinates had to be brought into place to comprehend how a planned economy might have been undertaken in the first place.<sup>40</sup> The ends liberalization aimed at, e.g., deregulation, opening the domestic market, and increasing consumption, involved political outcomes that eluded any purely economic analysis. Understood as a historical conjuncture, liberalization brought together a broad range of ostensibly unrelated tendencies, in a changing combination whose unity lay in their contribution to the growth and development of the market: the dismantling of economic controls, the expansion of communications, including the institution of national television, and the changing political balance of forces.<sup>41</sup> The end of the era of one-party dominance and the gradual loss of legitimacy of the planned economy was accompanied by a change in the terms of reference, so that the value of terms such as "public" and "private" appeared reversed. Now the private sector seemed to be the great reservoir of hope for growth, and the public sector the impediment



to realizing this hope; earlier, investment in the public sector had symbolized the national will to modernize. There was obviously nothing inevitable about the transformation in perspective, although it did follow market-oriented shifts in the West. A look at the broader historical circumstances preceding the shift helps illuminate the changes in political language that emerged.

Two streams of discourse, on economic liberalization and “Hindu-ness,” came to prominence in close succession in the mid-1980s, each reinforcing the resurgent rhetoric of the other, while also periodically clashing, in their *laissez-faire* and communitarian resonances. With the prying loose of voters from the Congress Party’s decades-old hegemony on the one hand, and the efforts of businesses to secure dominance with market liberalization still nascent on the other, voters and consumers both became subject to intense recruitment. Communal mobilization occurred at the nexus between these strategies, which were united in their technologies of communication, and in their credo of opening out to the world. BJP leader Pramod Mahajan defended this nexus between marketing and political mobilization: “I think it is time we stopped shying away from words such as ‘sell.’ We must realize there has been a major revolution in communication. If we maintain that a good ad campaign can’t sell a bad product, conversely people will never purchase a good product if they don’t know about it.”<sup>42</sup> Mahajan’s assumption of the necessary equation between buying and voting pointed, in its own way, to a re-politicization of the electoral process in the wake of the Congress’s decline. The euphoria over liberalization, the growing assertiveness of its beneficiary classes, and the spread of a consumerist ethos, required a new set of ideas to replace a political world-view that now became associated with stasis and quietism. The Hindu nationalists’ appeals echoed and reinforced those of an expanding market economy, both expressing the cultural and political assertion of newly rich classes.<sup>43</sup> Understanding the spread of Hindu nationalism, then, requires inquiring how a sectarian ideology could metamorphose into a “good product,” and how the political project of the BJP could be advanced in the process.

The remainder of this chapter illuminates the circumstances in which such a shift of political language occurred, such that Hindu nationalism became simultaneously an ideology aspiring to hegemony and an array of consumable objects, and how these developments in turn enabled the rise of the BJP and forged the nature of its appeal.

PASSIVE REVOLUTION AND THE UNRAVELING OF A FRAGILE  
CONSENSUS

A variety of factors had allowed majority governments to rule in a heterogeneous polity like India, although no party acquired an absolute majority. These factors included the fragmentation of the electorate along class and caste lines and the imperatives of securing power in such a context, as well as the nature of the Indian electoral system itself.<sup>44</sup> This led to what has been described as centrist politics, which meant in practice that compromises were made with erstwhile ruling classes in most regions of the country. From an independence movement, the Indian National Congress shifted to being a party of government, beginning with the compromise and consent of a range of class interests, and developing over time into little more than a mechanism for fighting elections. In the two decades following Independence, most power was handled by state-level bosses who ran traditional party machines based on patronage. It was through the state leaders that new political aspirants challenged Indira Gandhi in 1967 and 1969, and it was their candidates whom she defeated in 1971 and 1972. Thereafter, she attempted to prevent independent centers of power from developing. State and local level leaders were liable to be dismissed if they functioned independently; after 1971, appointments were made from the center rather than through the Congress Committees. The older functions of the Congress Party, including generating local support, negotiating between local interests, and acting as a grass-roots conduit of information between center and branch, declined. In their stead, Mrs. Gandhi increasingly resorted to the bureaucracy to replace these functions, including the government intelligence bureaus, the Central Reserve Police Force, and sundry paramilitary institutions. Over time, the consensus it represented dwindled, although the halo achieved with independence could not be erased so easily; rather, it drew out the party's atrophy.

There was a contradiction between the economic and the political priorities of the government, between the goal of increasing economic growth, and that of ensuring its political survival by improving the income and consumption of the majority. Since economic growth did not generate sufficient revenues for redistribution by the state, raising mass consumption and purchasing the electorate's temporary allegiance effectively undercut investment in development. The government's inability to limit income tax evasion and various forms of corruption,

and its unwillingness to impose direct taxes on agricultural income, remained as limits on revenue collection. The flexibility of the government in responding to crises steadily diminished over time, and if the accumulation of power at the top compensated for a rigid and unresponsive bureaucracy, the translation of this power into effective decision-making diminished in tandem. What followed has been described as a structural crisis of the Indian state.<sup>45</sup>

That the BJP came to stand out as having a “fresh” appeal to voters reflected a deep-rooted problem of political rhetoric.<sup>46</sup> The BJP, after all, claimed to be returning to the culture of the people, long scorned by the colonial elite and their imitators in the Nehruvian Congress. Hindutva’s rise can be seen as a partial and contradictory vernacularization of political language, where concepts existing at a remove for the majority, such as those of nation and citizenship, were rendered into local vocabularies, and in the process underwent a shift of meaning.<sup>47</sup> The language of Hindutva represented a very specific kind of vernacularization, deploying a range of localized narratives and themes that were subsumed under a strictly limited set of Hindu symbols and political demands.<sup>48</sup> The party’s own aims were to increase their support rather than actually re-orient politics towards the grassroots, no doubt. Nevertheless, a language that distanced itself from politics as usual and that expressed itself in a simple idiom of faith, divisive as it was, signaled at the same time the availability of a political choice and a widening of the space for popular participation. The invocation of terms that were part of the daily lexicon, but little used in national politics, effectively drew on the performative character of language and helped the BJP bring a wider circle into the stream of national politics.

The limited, makeshift nature of this politicization, on a continuum with the broader process of social and political change, can be understood in terms of Gramsci’s notion of a “passive revolution.”<sup>49</sup> The term refers to the relatively non-confrontational approach to change required of a ruling elite that lacks the power to carry out a Jacobin, i.e., for Gramsci, classical bourgeois revolution. With the resulting lack of mass participation in the political process, the state proceeds on a more limited, reformist basis, working through molecular transformations below the surface, to advance the bourgeoisie’s power. For instance, Gramsci cites the case of Italy, where the aspirations of the great mass of the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie were raised, enlisting their services in the reinforcement of traditional ruling classes’ hegemony. Similarly, in India, the promise of averting any fundamental social

transformation is the necessary compromise the state makes with the old ruling classes, so that the state becomes at once the guardian of tradition and the apostle of modernity. Whether such arrangements themselves succeed or not, they form a framework of perception that helps bring the state's class allies together.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the precise character of consent influences the character of politics. Nehruvianism, held to represent the consent of the majority, in fact involved only a small minority, comprised of the educated middle and upper classes.

Nehruvianism, vociferously criticized by the BJP and by other advocates of liberalization as responsible for the waste and inefficiency of a planned economy, did not in fact possess the coherence attributed to it.<sup>51</sup> The failures of the economy could indeed have been attributed to too little rather than too much planning, and to the inappropriate character of existing plans. In fact, there were limitations built into the way in which economic growth was being managed, which when taken into account presented a very different picture from what was most prominent in debates of the late 1980s. The regulatory power of the state in India was less than in many western countries that were described as having planned economies. The proportion of national income collected through taxation and other state measures was relatively small, as was the area of economic activity directly under the state, and the extent to which the state was engaged in redistributive measures. To quote D. R. Gadgil, who played a prominent part in the early economic debates, "Planning in India has yet to be looked upon as an uncertain, though pretentious, enterprise in which the volume and the quality of effort by government are too inadequate to make any large and consistent impression on the total situation."<sup>52</sup>

The heterogeneous and unevenly developed society and the considerable expanse of the country, Gadgil argued, rendered it difficult for government policy to be coherent or unified. In fact, the modalities of industrialization were ad hoc, and never existed as a theoretical framework, or as a systematic plan of economic development. Thus for instance the approach of heavy capital investment in an industrial infrastructure was bound to cause severe hardship in a predominantly rural economy. At the same time, it entailed an increase in the concentration of economic control in an already highly unequal society. Although some of this control was in government hands, the greatest part of industrialization was achieved by capitalist business. This was capitalism with a difference, however, since any success achieved by private

industry depended on state planning, and was protected at public cost. With capital formation centered in the private sector, those industrialists permitted to operate were also afforded a large margin of savings over and beyond their regular profit levels. In effect, as Gadgil wrote, “[T]he existing group of capitalists is assured of a monopoly of large expansion-opportunities in the future and a continued and an increasingly concentrated hold on the industrial economy.”<sup>53</sup> Emphasizing “production before distribution,” in the phrase of the time, assumed that more production would eventually lead to better distribution (of wealth produced). In effect this legitimated private ownership and concentration, and relegated the question of living standards for the majority to the sidelines.<sup>54</sup>

Few advocates of liberalization, however, criticized this elitist bias, or the implicitly trickle-down emphasis of the Nehruvian planned economy approach.<sup>55</sup> State planning itself was rejected, often without acknowledging the enormous gains made since Independence, as hampering economic efficiency and curbing the growth of Indian business.<sup>56</sup> Laissez faire would restore to the private sector the efficiency that it was truly capable of, in this argument, and generate enough wealth to go around. There were at least two important and related flaws in the argument. It assumed that the private sector in India was autonomous and that its growth had been self-propelled, rather than acknowledging the pampered entity it actually was. Secondly, the case for a “minimalist state” was not in fact to be taken literally, since tighter and more efficient controls over the economy were required, for instance to allow businesses to close down industries when they chose, and to discipline labor in the process. There was thus a restructuring of the character of state power and of the mode of governmental intervention. As T. J. Byres has written, “The state, then, beneath the cloak of privatisation and deregulation, would become, in particular respects, more intrusive than it was previously.”<sup>57</sup>

Economic liberalization, however, also meant a delegation of a larger share of power to the “fortresses and earthworks” of civil society,<sup>58</sup> to private business and market forces. The prominence of Hindutva pointed to the political advantage in offering a cultural component to this “solution,” in the attempt to widen the base of the erstwhile consensus. But any attempt at politicization would inevitably be difficult and conflicted, and test the preparedness of leadership and of existing institutions to withstand the pressures released in the process. The choice of Hindutva in particular was a deeply problematic one.

On 26 June 1975, Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency, allegedly to prevent a conspiracy from undermining the progressive measures being undertaken by her. A national railway workers' strike and broad-based popular campaigns in one of the more urbanized and developed states, Gujarat, and in one of the most backward, Bihar (campaigns which were both escalating into nationwide opposition movements) formed the background to the decision. Individual rights were revoked, including the right to move courts and the right to trial; over 100,000 arrests of political leaders and dissidents were made during the eighteen month period before elections were called.<sup>59</sup> Side by side with political repression were measures to promote economic growth and equity, such as the Twenty Point Program, heralded as a "direct assault on poverty."<sup>60</sup> It gave priority to implementing laws on land ceilings, housing for landless labor, abolition of bonded labor and of rural indebtedness, and providing higher minimum wages for agricultural workers. Special teams were instituted in the large cities, to undertake house-to-house searches for undisclosed or undervalued property. Widely publicized campaigns against tax evasion and smuggling were launched, and within twelve months over 2,100 alleged smugglers were jailed and property worth over ten million rupees seized.<sup>61</sup> Labor "peace" was achieved, with a dramatic decrease in strikes and lockouts of about 75 percent.<sup>62</sup>

The government's aim appeared to be to stop at source all conceivable political opposition. Elections were suspended and press censorship instituted. A constitutional amendment was passed in Parliament, the Forty-fourth Amendment Bill, that gave Parliament unrestricted power to amend the Constitution and made citizens' fundamental rights subordinate to a new code of "Fundamental Duties."<sup>63</sup> The Youth Congress promoted by Sanjay Gandhi, son of the Prime Minister, attempted to generate a measure of grassroots support, but it was perhaps better known for its promotion of harsh measures such as forcible sterilization and slum demolition.<sup>64</sup>

The Emergency sought to divert energies dammed in the political process and harness them for economic production and national unity. Thus the ubiquitous billboards and posters in towns and cities contained slogans and exhortations such as the following: "Discipline makes the nation great," "The 20 point program is the nation's charter," "Rumor mongers are the nation's enemies," "Efficiency is our watchword," "Produce more for prosperity," and "Less Talk, More Work."<sup>65</sup> The stern, admonitory character of the publicity presumed the existence of a

willing and obedient citizenry; the profuse deployment of police and other repressive measures suggested the absence of such a population. Taken together, they indicated an inability to transcend the political crisis that the Emergency was meant to resolve, and they gave a hint of where at least one crucial problem might lie. There was perhaps an overly abstract conception of the audience of these messages, as citizens predisposed to discipline, hard work, and national pride. But as Indira Gandhi herself said, in a 1976 interview, “One thing that people outside simply can’t understand [is] that India is a different country.”<sup>66</sup> No doubt. Her confidence that it could change easily was then perhaps misplaced. Lee Schlesinger provides a lapidary anecdote about some flawed propaganda during this time:

Many of the posters and slogans were stilted translations of the Prime Minister’s idiomatic Indian English; she said that the only magic is hard work, clear vision, iron will and strict discipline. The “only magic” came out in Marathi as precisely that – *ekatz jadu*. The urbane and poetic section of the populace may construe the metaphor properly, but for most the *jadu* sign said something confusing about trickery, perhaps expressing a truth about the government efforts which escaped the government translators. Of course, in many cases the meaning of the posters could be grasped without knowing all the words, but considering the posters as symbols of or for the Emergency, it is clear that in addition to whatever content, i.e., policy, may have been symbolized, one facet of the gap between the state and the citizen – namely, the entrenched inability to communicate effectively – was perhaps effectively communicated.<sup>67</sup>

The Emergency represented an authoritarian attempt to resolve the political crisis of the state, and overcome the economic stagnation resulting from the inability to mobilize labor and curtail revenue losses, to ensure investment and growth. The experience made clear the limits of an autarkic, extra-political solution to the interlinked problems of polity and economy, of the non-viability of forcibly jumpstarting a vigorous productive process. Liberalization represented a second attempt, working this time at different levels, through deregulation, privatization, and expansion of the consumer economy. It was presented as the need of the hour and a genuine response to prevailing problems. In fact, as K. Balagopal has argued, it was overdetermined. Its apparent causes were epiphenomenal: a balance of payments crisis, an IMF bailout, and structural adjustment serving to augur a new dispensation rather than manifesting as its true roots.<sup>68</sup>

What the Emergency led to was the closure of those channels of communication that could have corrected official misperceptions, such

as free speech, elections, and a free press. It confirmed for sections of the elite that democratic freedom aggravated rather than solved the country's problems, since trains now ran on time and workers were afraid to strike. But the real political lesson distilled in the end was the opposite. The defeat of the Congress in the elections, held in March 1977, proved that Indian difference notwithstanding, democracy and political awareness were now too deep-rooted to be wished away from the polity and that there was no possibility of working around these facts. Events leading up to the Emergency, as well as its aftermath, showed the indispensability of popular mobilization and the rewards of maintaining effective communication on terms that ordinary people at the grassroots could understand.

The historic consensus represented in the Congress continued to unravel. Moving away from its radical rhetoric of the Emergency days, but still unable to articulate a plausible unifying vision, the party began to make sectional appeals to portions of its coalition. In doing so, the Congress offered a political opportunity to its opponents to capitalize on the ensuing resentment of excluded sections. Alternative parties tended to be short-lived though, as leaders fell out with each other, and popular movements often failed to secure lasting means of political representation. Opposition parties succeeded mainly at the regional level and in the south; at the national level, diverse parties routinely submerged their differences in their attempt to dislodge the Congress, but with only occasional success.<sup>69</sup> Partly due to the limited size of opposition parties and the failure of an alternative political formation to cohere, the Congress became a familiar lesser-evil, an option that for all its corruption and ineptitude was always available to muddle through until the next election. It operated on the basis of expediency, and its continued survival was again a matter of expediency on a larger scale.<sup>70</sup>

Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister from 1985 to 1989, was the transitional figure who heralded a change. His policies, modeled after Reagan and Thatcher, signaled a dual emphasis on both market forces and "national culture" in some sense.<sup>71</sup> The difficulties of creating a state-sponsored national culture in a "secular" society, where there were limits to the overt emphasis on religion, together with the anglophonic character of state technocracy, tended to result in official propaganda indifferent to its reception.<sup>72</sup> With his accession to power, Rajiv Gandhi attempted to mark a distance between himself and his predecessors, coming into office as a "clean" Prime Minister, one who had only entered politics "to help Mummy out." Along with reforms that announced a move