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Religious Practices, Social Hierarchies, and Political Representation

Religious practice is closely linked to democracy in contemporary India. Most religious practice in India is local and consists of multiple rituals and performances that intersect but do not overlap. In an otherwise deeply hierarchical society, the venues in which these myriad forms of religious practice take place are some of the few spaces that citizens from different social strata share, fostering sympathetic ties between politicians and citizens who engage in religious practice. Moreover, citizen engagement with multiple forms of religious practice places limits on the possibility that a particular religious practice of any one of the numerically predominant religious denominations in India – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, and Christian – will establish ritual and political dominance.

This idea is different from a common theme running through the general study of religion in India, and particularly through the study of Hinduism, which stresses the hierarchical nature of the country's religions. This characteristic is often said to create and perpetuate caste-based inequality, to foster religious bigotry, and to institutionalize the dominance of some segments of Indian society over others.

It is true that religion, religious beliefs, and religious practices have featured prominently in the ideological and political dominance of the upper castes (Srinivas 1959; Hutton 1961; Thapar

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1977). Religion and its offshoots have been a cause of much suffering and violence in independent India. From the partition to the 1984 riots in Delhi and the 2002 riots in Gujarat, religious conflict has been a defining factor of Indian political life (Gopal 1993; Varshney 1993; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2004).

There is wide consensus among scholars of religious conflict in India that religious violence is a consequence of elite politics – partisan or otherwise. The elite politics that divides religious communities and can lead to violent conflict is but a very small part of the practice of religion in contemporary India. Most political scientists who study religion in India, often by focusing purely on religious conflict, have overlooked another possible political dimension of the most common social act in which Indians engage – the practice of religion.

The research reported in this book shows that religious practice in India does more than privilege the few over the many, and more than provide an avenue for political mobilization against other religions. Based on the behavior and opinion of citizens rather than elite machinations, it shows that religious practice, as India's most common form of associational life, is closely related to Indian citizens' perceptions of how representative their polity is. In pursuing this line of inquiry, the book questions a dominant strand in some contemporary social sciences – that a religious denomination (Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, etc.) is sufficient to explain the relationship between religion and politics. The book makes a strong case for studying religious practice and placing that practice in the panoply of other social practices.

This book posits three reasons for the close relationship between religious practice and representation. First, religious practice is local, multiple, and frequent. It is constitutive of the performance of rituals, attendance at religious gatherings, visits to temples and shrines, pilgrimages, and prayer. This practice is rarely, if ever, a solitary pursuit. Religious practice is community activity.

Second, the sites and occasions of religious practice constitute one of the very few public spheres in which the hierarchies that normally characterize Indian society are temporarily suspended

so that identic ties develop among people of strikingly different social classes and statuses. What are identic ties? Identic, used in diplomatic parlance, indicates when two or more governments share the same intention when dealing with another government. Translated to the practice of religion, identic implies two or more individuals who, despite their other differences, share the same intention vis-à-vis the divine. This word captures the essence of a religious ritual in which all who participate have similar enough interests despite well-established social differences. For instance, certain classes of people have access to the front of the line in a temple or the front pews in a church, but one's position in line does in no way alter the "shared intent" of participants in rituals in the front and back of the church or the line in a temple. These identic ties develop a sense of a shared space among those who practice religion – something that a deeply hierarchical society cannot otherwise provide. Religious practice is one of the few spaces that citizens share with others with whom they would normally not interact, thereby creating a sense of *commonality* among those who practice religion.[1] This is not to say that religious practice effaces other forms of marginality, such as those tied to caste and gender. It most expressly does not. But even among the marginalized, this book shows, those who practice religion are more likely to perceive the political process as representative. This characteristic of religious practice stands in contrast to caste politics, which is about domination, civil society that is for and by the connected and reproduces social inequalities, political parties that are dynastic, and a capricious state. These identic ties are positively associated with Indian citizens' perceptions of whether they are represented or not because they are formed in spaces shared by citizens of different social strata.

Third, local religious practice and representation are intertwined with each other because the Indian political elite share in these religious practices and do not view religious practice

[1] Flueckiger (2006) sees religious practice as central to developing a shared identity in India.

as a challenge to their political authority. The Indian electoral system – first past the post – not only necessitates the formation of cross-caste and cross-class coalitions but also creates the imperative to transgress local hierarchies to win elections. The identic ties generated through religious practice provide politicians, who report practicing religion quite avidly themselves, the opportunity to interact with voters as *one of them*. Religious leaders rarely, if ever, challenge political authority in the manner in which the church challenged the state in parts of Europe.

For these reasons those who practice religion are more likely to view political parties and politicians as representative. The evidence for this claim comes from multiple surveys, some commissioned expressly for this research, and it shows that there is a robust relationship between religious practice and perceptions of representation. The book builds on earlier claims that religious practice, which is ubiquitous in India, is linked to democratic attitudes and politics (Banerjee 2007; Kumar 2009b; Mehta 2011; Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011).

There are two clear implications of this argument. First, because of the local and variegated nature of religious practice, it is very difficult to scale religious practice to the national level. In other words, it is almost impossible today to isolate a pan-Indian Hindu, pan-Indian Muslim, or a pan-Indian Sikh religious practice that could then serve as a basis for political mobilization or for creating a state or religious order rooted in one form of religious practice. It is possible to create a pan-Indian Hindu or Muslim or Sikh identity, but, as the history of the Hindu fundamentalist movement shows, that identity is created politically and is not rooted in promoting one religious practice over another. This is in contrast to the internecine wars, for instance, between the various sects of Christianity in parts of Europe. The Hindu fundamentalist movement is far less rooted in conflict over forms of religious practice among Hindus than in the idea that India is a Hindu nation-state, with Hindu being defined mostly as non-Muslim and non-Christian. As Eck (2012) points out, Hindutva (as right-wing Hindu nationalism is termed) should not be confused with Hinduism. Moreover, she writes, a founder

of the right-wing Hindu movement, the nationalist Hindu Mahasabha – Vir Sarvakar "[was] not interested in ritual expressions or popular religiosity. . . . His vision was more political . . . more oriented to the language of communal identity than the reality of religious practice" (99).

Second, this focus on religious practice, with a concomitant stress on local identic ties distinguishes the book's claims from others that have been advanced in the relevant literature, where religion and religious practices are seen only as hierarchical arrangements for transmitting and accepting the authority of religious institutions or religious leaders. Religious practice in India certainly includes such hierarchical elements, and elite mobilization has, of course, led to violence in the name of the divine. But that violence, as is often pointed out, is the work of a few political actors who use violence to intimidate a religious "other" for political gains (Brass 1997; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2004).

Hindu-Muslim violence in independent India has almost no relationship to everyday forms of religious practices. It occurs when local vested interests – politicians (Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2004) and economic actors (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987) – use local riot machines (Brass 1997) to light the sparks intended to create Hindu-Muslim violence. Whether or not those sparks become fires is conditioned by political factors such as electoral considerations (Wilkinson 2004) or the degree of social capital (Varshney 2002). In none of these explanations is the Hindu-Muslim conflict tied to deep theological differences over local religious practices.

Does this religious practice play a role in whether they perceive political parties and politicians as representing constituents' interests? And why should religious practice even be considered as possibly influencing Indian citizens' perceptions of their political representation? By examining the hierarchical nature of Indian society, the variety of India's religious practices, and the possibilities for political representation in India, this chapter establishes the context for the chapters that follow, in which Indian citizens' religious practice is shown to have a robust effect on citizens' favorable perceptions of the nature of their political

representation. This chapter and parts of the next chapter lay out
the broad outlines of how religious practice creates identic ties,
thus influencing those who practice to perceive political parties,
politicians, and other influential political actors as responsive to
constituents' interests.

HOMO HIERARCHICUS: SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN INDIA

India is an extremely hierarchical, status-conscious society. Divi-
sions of caste, class, and gender are pervasive. Sociologists have
often commented on the social and geographical distinctions that
characterize and reproduce caste in Indian villages. Discrimina-
tion and atrocities against *dalits* are common across many parts
of India. Local caste groups, called *Khap panchayats* in parts
of North India, enforce caste endogamy by ostracizing and even
murdering those who marry outside their caste.[2] Caste distinc-
tions may be less visibly pronounced in urban India, but there is
no denying that some of them are significant, especially if they
overlap with distinctions of social class.

Women have secondary status in most of India. The number
of women as a proportion of the population has come down
since independence. In some areas there are fewer than 800
women for every 1,000 men. The girl child is not given pref-
erence in schooling and allocation of health care compared to
the male child. Women are aware of this discrimination; asked
in a survey in a conservative setting in Northern India in 1996,
overwhelming majorities said that they knew they were being
discriminated against (Chhibber 2002). Many segments of the
tribal populations have not been incorporated into Indian soci-
ety, and some even support violent movements for the overthrow
of the state. The poor report being mistreated by the powerful
and the agents of the state (Ahuja and Chhibber 2012). It is

[2] A *Khap panchayat* is a body composed of the members of a few villages. In
some parts of contemporary India, it has taken on quasi-judicial functions,
especially when it comes to intercaste marriages.

these multiple injuries that have led many to comment that in India the politics of dignity is important and others to wonder how democracy could be sustained in such a hierarchical society (Mehta 2012). Clarence Maloney (2006), writing in the *Hindu* newspaper, makes a persuasive case that language, too, is a "social class marker" in that the elite status once assigned to Sanskrit and then to Persian is now associated with English.[3] An individual in India is *marked* by his or her socioeconomic background, physical appearance, caste, class, native language, manner of dress, and the like. And placing people is very important; even the smallest indications of status are socially significant and determine how an individual will be treated.

But what is most fascinating about social distinctions in India is how social status is recognized and reproduced; people can spot status differences, and those differences are acknowledged because they determine social standing (Dickey 2000; Frøystad 2012; Ray and Qayum 2009). Pratap Mehta (2012), writing about the inequality that pervades India, describes its associated indignities as constituting "a self-perpetuating system" that is "rarely frontally challenged":

[I]n a society riven by deep inequality there is not even the minimal basis for mutual concern. Where social distance makes human beings almost a different species in each other's eyes, why would you expect anything else? Why would a contractor care if one of his construction workers used his hands rather than a brush to apply a dangerous chemical? The more inequality there is, the harder it is to imagine what it is like to be in someone else's shoes. It has to be admitted that even the most well-meaning and sensitive find it hard to imagine what the suffocation, darkness and sheer physical suffering of being at the bottom of a social hierarchy might be really like.[4]

This is the challenge facing democracy in India: How do you sustain democracy in a hierarchical society? The adoption of the Indian constitution in 1950 was a signal attempt to provide a political solution to redress social hierarchies. The idea of India

[3] See http://www.hindu.com/op/2006/07/02/stories/2006070200661600.htm.
[4] See http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reporting-and-essays/essay.

was that the state and its agents would transform social relations
through political power (Khilnani 2004). Have the political insti-
tutions of the modern Indian state set up conditions that undercut
social hierarchies? Indeed, democracy has tempered some of these
divisions. There is the well-known rise of *dalit* parties and the
gradual political ascendance of the numerous backward castes
into positions of power. These political developments have not
yet completely undermined the extremely status-conscious and
hierarchical nature of social interactions in India, and in fact, the
agents of the state have taken on the trappings of power.

In India, the modern state – purportedly the center of equal
political representation for all citizens – is often seen as sepa-
rate from the people and is actually the province of the rich
and powerful. The Indian bureaucracy embodies this power and
could definitely do more to make the state responsive to the
citizens. Amit Ahuja, writing in an Indian newspaper, notes that
when he was settling some bureaucratic matters involved with his
late father's estate, he not only had to pay the relevant bureau-
crat a bribe but was also expected to acknowledge the bureau-
crat's power by groveling before him. As another example of
such practices, a high-ranking police official in Punjab was dis-
covered to have employed thirty-one lower-ranking policemen
to do household chores for him.[5] Data from surveys in India
show that bureaucrats are more likely than politicians to be rude
to common citizens. A major failing of the Indian bureaucracy
is that many citizens report that the state not only fails them
but also often ridicules and intimidates them. In January 2009,
Lokniti-CSDS contacted more than 17,000 respondents as part
of a State of the Nation survey (SONS) and asked about their
experiences in meeting politicians and bureaucrats. On average,
citizens felt bureaucrats were more inattentive and rude in com-
parison to elected representatives. In the same survey respondents
were asked who they would approach if they faced difficulty in
getting important work done. Around two-thirds of respondents

[5] See http://www.indianexpress.com/news/-will-take-action-against-ig-for-using-
officers-as-servants-/1016206/.

would approach a local politician, and less than one in every six respondents said they would approach a government officer.

Politicians in India – called *netas*, or leaders (the linguistic turn is itself interesting) – actively court external markers of power, the most ostentatious of which is a gun-toting security detail. It is not unusual to see armed guards walking with a politician (or his family) in, say, a public marketplace in Delhi – and the more guns, the more power the politician is thought to project. Indian politicians are quite flagrant about flaunting their power. In one well-publicized case, a tollbooth attendant asked a Member of Parliament (MP) for evidence that he was an MP – evidence that the attendant needed in order to allow the MP's vehicle free passage – and the MP brandished a weapon; later on the MP expressed no remorse about what he had done.[6]

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND SHARED FATES

Given these deep inequalities, where in India are citizens likely to share a common space? Indian citizens rarely share the same space with their fellow citizens who belong to different social strata. A walk through any public area confirms this observation. Exceptions to this rule may include sporting events and *melas* (fairs), but a clear and notable departure from the norm is the sphere of religious practice – one of the few public spaces where boundaries of caste, class, and power are transgressed as diverse individuals come together in relationships of sympathetic identification and share common experiences.

It is true, of course, that the public practice of religion does not transgress all hierarchies. Women, people of other faiths, and even people of different castes are sometimes excluded. Even now, in some temples in the south, women of certain ages are not allowed into the temple, and there are instances of signs outside temples stating that only Hindus can enter the temple. *Local religious practices, particularly religious festivals, rituals,*

[6] See http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-10-12/vadodara/34411387_1_toll-collector-toll-booth-police-complaint.

and ceremonies, are more inclusive than other social institutions.
There are local religious leaders and sites where nominal dis-
tinctions among social groups may be blurred. Religious practice
is also associated with creating a common thread that effaces
differences among the various segments that make up a caste
(Michelutti 2008). Religious practice then offers citizens a more
common and shared experience than that available through nom-
inal caste affiliations, the associations of civil society, interactions
with the state, and sometimes even political parties. Indeed, just
as the Indian state and society are implicated in systems of hier-
archy and inequality, the public sphere of religious practice has
the potential to offer participants a more open, inclusive, and less
hierarchical space, and most Indians, regardless of their particu-
lar beliefs, engage in religious practice.

PREVALENCE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Most Indians are socialized from birth into religious practices.
Rituals, prayers, and ceremonies occupy a prominent place in
most households, and families and individuals commonly attend
religious festivals, which mark the calendar and the rhythm of
the seasons and form an important and publicly visible aspect
of social life. The near ubiquity of religious practice is most
evident in the sheer number of buildings in which religious prac-
tice takes place. In 2011, the Census of India, which counts the
number of physical structures (called census houses) and identi-
fies their use, reported that more than 3 million structures were
being used as places of worship.[7] This number, accounting for

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[7] Census "house" was defined as a structure or part of a structure inhabited or
vacant, or a dwelling, a shop, a shop-cum-dwelling, or a place of business,
workshop, school, and the like with a separate main entrance. In the 1971
census, "house" was defined "as a building or part of a building having a
separate main entrance from the road or common courtyard or stair case etc.
Used or recognised as a separate unit, it may be inhabited or vacant. It may be
used for a residential or non-residential purpose or both" (http://censusindia
.gov.in/Data_Products/Library/Indian_perceptive_link/Census_Terms_link/
censusterms.html).