

***NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION***

---

***CHANGING PATTERNS OF  
NATIONAL IDENTITY IN INDIA***

*Armando Barucco - Fellow (2006-2007)*  
*Weatherhead Center for International Affairs*  
*Harvard University*  
*armando\_barucco@hotmail.com*  
*armando.barucco@esteri.it*

***Disclaimer***

*The opinions expressed by the author in this paper are his personal view and do not represent those of his administration (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Italy), or the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs*

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>p. 4</b>
<b><u>I. - Methodological Notes</u></b>	<b>“ 7</b>
<i>Globalization and the Crisis of the Nation-State</i>	“ 7
<i>National Identity as a Product of Imagination</i>	“ 8
<i>The Influence of Gramsci on Indian Social Sciences</i>	“ 10
<i>Global Elites, Local Elites and the Masses</i>	“ 12
<b><u>II. – India as “Third-World Superpower</u></b>	<b>“ 15</b>
<i>Past, Present and Future</i>	“ 15
<i>Indian Demographic Trends: Curse or Window of Opportunity</i>	“ 19
<b><u>III. – The New Garbs of Indian Modernity</u></b>	<b>“ 23</b>
<i>Cities vs. Countryside</i>	“ 23
<i>Urban and Rural Imagination</i>	“ 26
<i>The Resurrection of the Caste System</i>	“ 28
<i>Class vs. Caste</i>	“ 31
<i>The New Middle Class</i>	“ 34
<i>Towards a New Caste/Class Politics?</i>	“ 36
<b><u>IV. – India’s Struggling Identity</u></b>	<b>“ 41</b>
<i>Hinduism: Religion vs. Orthopraxis</i>	“ 41
<i>Religious Identity and National Identity: Hindu Revivalism</i>	“ 44
<i>The Making of Indian National Identity as a Hegemonic Project</i>	“ 46
<i>Alternative Visions of India</i>	“ 50
<i>Hindu Nationalism</i>	“ 53
<i>A New Indian Common Sense?</i>	“ 56
<i>Crisis of Secularism</i>	“ 59
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>“ 62</b>



*Figure 1: Nargis in Mother India (1957)*



## Introduction

In the iconography of Indian independence, one can find powerful images mediating between the realms of semi-religious imagination and political struggle; the most famous image is that of India reborn as the mother-goddess, the Devi, often portrayed as Durga, accompanied by a tiger and/or a lion.<sup>1</sup> The most famous and celebrated movie in Indian history remains *Mother India* directed by Mehboob Khan (Figure 1), in which Nargis, an icon of Indian cinema, plays the role of a young peasant woman who rears her two sons under incredible hardship in a rural Indian village; in a tragic finale, she kills her younger son, who has become the leader of a group of bandits and is threatening the honor of a local girl and of the same village-community.<sup>2</sup>

The strength of this image has had a deep influence on Indian politics; the perception of Indira Gandhi by the masses owes much to the idea of *Mother India* and even more to the inherent vital force and energy embodied in the Hindu concept of Shakti (the personification of the divine female power), but also, especially in her last years, to the ferocity of Durga.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, Sonia Gandhi's renunciation of the premiership after her astonishing victory in the 2004 elections was, according to her own words, suggested by an "inner voice" (the voice of *Mother India*?), but was also portrayed as the sacrifice that only a mother could make for the sake her children.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2: Subhash Balidan. Calendar Art. Courtesy of The Osian's Archive & Library Collections, India.

Connected to the image of India as Devi, a terrifying and demanding divinity, but a caring mother, is the iconography of martyrdom, which can be found in the more popular forms of art, such as calendars, with an ingenious mix of popular

---

<sup>1</sup>The first known representations of the earth goddess in India—among the oldest in the world—were found in Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, the two cities belonging to the Indus Valley civilization (according to some scholars, spanning four millennia starting in 5500 B.C.). The Atharva Veda hymn refers to her as Prithvi Mata (mother earth), but she is represented under many different forms and names, according also to the different local cultures, the most prominent of which is probably Shakti, embodying the concept of divine energy.

<sup>2</sup>*Mother India* was India's first Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film, in 1957. M. Shedde, "Bollywood Cinema: Making Elephants Fly," *Cineaste*, Summer 2006.

<sup>3</sup>See the paradigmatic depiction of Indira Gandhi as "The Widow" in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, but also, among others, Pankaj Mishra's *Temptations of the West* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Durga is one of the names of the female divinity as consort of Shiva. She is mostly depicted as a warrior riding a tiger or a lion and carrying numerous weapons.

<sup>4</sup>During the electoral campaign in 2003-04, Sonia Gandhi's Italian origin was constantly used as a xenophobic/nationalist argument by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Shiv Sena, and other Hindu nationalist organizations; the situation just after the election was extremely tense with a serious risk of riots between activists of both sides.

devotion and nationalist pride. A striking example is evident in one of the series dedicated to independence leader Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, portrayed gruesomely offering his severed head to the victorious Indian nation depicted as Durga with her metaphoric necklace of heads belonging to the heroes of the anti-colonial struggle<sup>5</sup> (Figure 2). A similar iconography, drawing inspiration also from Christian imagery, is often used for Mahatma Gandhi (Figures 3, 4, 12 and 13).

On a strikingly different note, the leaders of the fight against the British Empire, and some of the martyrs, were displayed in a recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Arts in Mumbai in a sculpture by Nataraj Sharma. The figures were represented as riding on a minibus with their faces visible through the windows, an ironic, but affectionate vision of the struggle for Indian independence set against the background of contemporary India and the deconstruction of some of the myths upon which Indian national identity has been built (Figure 5).

India is mostly portrayed as a land of striking contrasts: “it is economically fragmented, if not polarized, and driven by linguistic, religious, caste and even racial cleavages of great complexity. Yet . . . it provides the most rigorous, and useful proving ground for testing hypotheses correlating the various dimensions of progress.”<sup>6</sup>

In the impressive wave of recent publications dedicated to the “new Indian miracle,” there is a constant rhetorical artifice, the enumeration of paradoxes and contrasts that seem to characterize Indian society, her economic miracle, and complex politics.



**Figure 3: Swarg Mein Bapu. Courtesy of The Osian’s Archive & Library Collections, India.**

I will also use a paradoxical framework in attempting to define how Indian national identity has been constantly evolving in the past century and a half, especially in the past twenty years, since the first reforms of the Rajiv Gandhi government, which set the foundations for the Indian miracle. The nation’s complex political and socio-religious structure, as well as her influential culture, makes India a most interesting laboratory for understanding how economic development and globalization are reshaping the relationships among national, regional, social, and religious loyalties, among nationalism, secularism, and communalism, among the nation-state, civil society, and social structures.

Finally, the seemingly eternal debate about Indian national identity is extremely important for Europeans (and Americans), who are facing similar convulsions in their own societies and the difficult process of adjusting to the new rules of a globalized world; this is especially true for the citizens of the

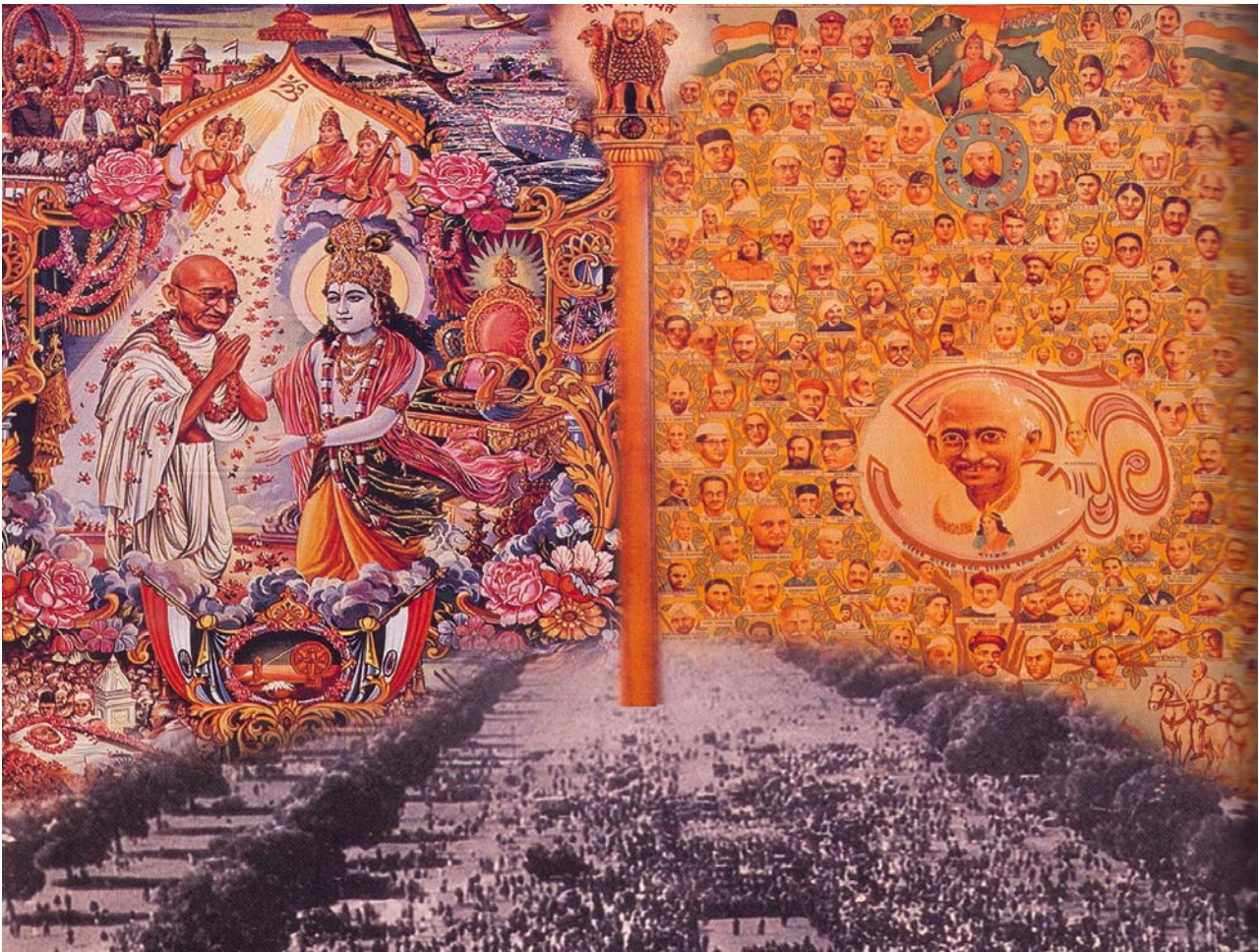
<sup>5</sup>A *Historical Epic. India in the Making 1757-1950*, edited by Neville Tuli, published by Osian’s, Mumbai, 2002, pp. 217 and 234.

<sup>6</sup>L. Dittmer, “Modernizing Tradition in India: An Introduction,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40, No. 5, p. 710.



European Union (EU) member states, who are involved in a controversial and never-ending debate about the construction of a new collective identity.

And it truly seems that, from this point of view too, India represents Europe's past as well as its future. "It is Europe's past, in that it has reproduced, albeit fiercely and intensely, the conflicts of a modernizing, industrializing, and urbanizing society. But it is also its future, in that it anticipated by some 50 years the European attempt to create a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multiethnic, political, and economic community."<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 4: Collage of Popular Images of Gandhi. Below, the Mahatma's funeral.  
Courtesy of The Osian's Archive & Library Collections, India.*

---

<sup>7</sup>R. Guha, *Outlook Magazine*, 21 May 2007.

## I. Methodological Notes

### *Globalization and the Crisis of the Nation-State*

Does it still make sense to study national identity in a world in which nation-states appear to be facing an unprecedented crisis? A crisis in which the process of globalization and the rising of intellectual, ethnic, and transnational religious loyalties, the ubiquitous diasporas and the success of supranational integration, a truly global economy and an equally global civil society—both very aggressive and demanding—seem to be playing a major role.

The crisis of the system of nation-state has been the subject of much research over the past fifteen years. Arjun Appadurai sees this crisis mainly as the result of two combined forces: mass migration and the electronic revolution in the mass media. The combination of these two forces is contributing to the creation of a new postnational imagination, “new diasporic public spheres transcending the boundaries of nation-state,” exemplified by transnational ethnic and/or religious movements, multicultural cities and societies, and local insurgencies with global links (the Kurds, the Sikhs, the Tamils, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

For Appadurai, “we have to think ourselves beyond the nation-state” as in our times this institution has failed its most important function: “the arbitration between globality and modernity.” The crisis of nation-state is not negative per se, either for Appadurai’s interpretation of nationhood as linked to the idea of ethnic purity via the “cosmology of the sacred nation,” or for his faith in the new “cellular” organization of the globalized world. In this new cellular world—as opposed to the “vertebrate” world “organized through the central spinal system of international balances of power, military treaties, economic alliances”—“transnational activist networks” are already replacing public administration, and playing a positive role in “virtually every area of human equity and welfare.”<sup>2</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman places emphasis on the work of transnational forces manipulated by invisible actors, who are constantly eroding the political/military, economic, and cultural foundations of the nation-state; to him, the main threat is coming from the erosion of the economic pillar as well as from the gradual loss of the capabilities of governments to respond to their citizens’ basic needs, especially in terms of welfare and security.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 5: Freedom Bus (Or a View from the 6th Standard), Nataraj Sharma, 2001-2004*

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Appadurai, *Modernity in Polvere*, Meltemi 2001, Roma, pp. 36-40 (original title: *Modernity at Large*, 1996). See also the comment by Charta Patterjee, “Beyond the Nation or Within?” *Social Text*, No. 56 (Autumn 1998), pp. 57-69.

<sup>2</sup>A. Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 4, 19, 132.

<sup>3</sup>Z. Bauman, “Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone,” *Laterza* 2006, pp. 66-74 (original title: “Globalization: the Human Consequences”).

The challenge is both economic and cultural: on the economic side, nation-states are losing many of the functions upon which, in the course of the past two centuries, they built their “apparatus” and created a sense of their own mission toward their citizens; on the cultural side, the logic of privatization is extending its influence even in sectors like basic public infrastructures that are simply not viable from an economic point of view,<sup>4</sup> thus creating a conventional wisdom that “the public is always bad and the private is always good.” Among the casualties of this battle are the concepts of equity, justice and “substantial” equality among the citizens, as well as public services, progressive taxation, and redistributive policies.

These analyses put into question the enduring viability of the nation-state model and the concept of national identity as a tool to understand (and act in) the global world, especially in the context of the major challenges of global governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: security and terrorism after 9/11, the management of a globalized economy, including the growing inequalities in developed and underdeveloped societies, environmental issues, transnational crime, and the management of migration flows and resulting multicultural societies.

Apparently, the rise of ethnic and religious movements and their successes in terms of appealing to basic notions of community and “nation” show a strikingly different pattern, confirming the strength and variety of forms adopted by a post-modern nationalist imagination. But in many cases, these movements and their ideology represent a new form of “privatization” of public policy, a response from different layers of the society to the challenges posed by globalization and the alleged inability of the state to cope with them.

They truly seem to be “local solutions to global problems.” And, more than reasserting the enduring strength of the nation-state, they seem to confirm the schism between the nation and the state, which is considered inadequate in coping with the challenges of the real world and is therefore asked either to support these movements, or at least to be neutral.<sup>5</sup> Going back to India, that is what actually happened with the massacre of Sikhs in 1984, with the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992-1993, and, more recently, with the Gujarat massacres in 2002, where the response of national and local authorities to Hindu violence was at best ambiguous.

### ***National Identity as a Product of Imagination***

National identity has been (for better or worse)—and still is in my view—an essential tool for governance. This is particularly the case for developing countries, given the challenges they have to face in terms of management of the economy, sustainable development, income inequalities and, as in the case of India, management of ethnic and religious diversity. In Europe, the debate about the construction of a collective identity—which involves the debate about national identities as opposed to European identity, as well as the contribution of religion and ethics to both—and the redefinition of a broader national/European interest is very much alive and at the core of some of the difficulties faced by the EU integration process. To name just a few of these challenges: the failure of the treaty establishing the European Constitution, the quarrel about the accessions of Turkey and the Balkan states, the reform of the welfare state, and the integration of migrants, especially those belonging to different cultures and religions.

---

<sup>4</sup>For instance, the provision of drinkable water, the building of sewage systems, the irrigation of drought-affected areas, etc.

<sup>5</sup>Ibidem, pp.70-72.



The issue of national identity is at the heart of the debate about the role of the newly emerging economic powers of Asia. India is one of the most populous countries of the world; it is facing unprecedented rates of growth, but also increasing problems in terms of access to and management of natural resources, the urban/rural divide, pollution, growth of nationalism and ethno-religious conflicts, and social inequalities and rampant corruption. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar picture could be sketched for China. A growing fear regarding the effects of globalization and Western homogenizing neo-imperialism is now a part of public discourse in both nations.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it is clear to me that the manner in which Indians, and indeed Chinese, perceive, and/or reshape, their national identity is of paramount importance not only for the continuous growth and development of their respective economies and the future of their societies, but also for their relationships with their neighbors and with the rest of the world.

From the methodological point of view, it is important to clarify the distinction between national identity (the material and spiritual, physical, and behavioral features of a given nation), national consciousness (the subjective self-image that citizens have of their nation), nationalism (ideology), and patriotism (sense of attachment and loyalty to one's nation)—all terms that are often regarded as interchangeable.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, more than in the past, the notions of national identity and national consciousness are strictly interrelated and symbiotic, thanks also to some specific features of globalization: the role of transnational diasporas; the global-local debate about ideas and identities; the emergence of new elites deeply embedded in the local, but at the same time perfectly aware of the dangers and promises of globalization and of the potential of the communication/information age and new electronic media. Changes in the economic and social fabric and in the composition of the elite are exposing some of the fallacies of colonial and post-colonial visions of Indian national identity, built somehow on Orientalist perceptions and on the elite's political and social background, and strengthened by specific historical events and circumstances, such as the tragedy of 1947 "partition" in the sub-continent.

Though intrigued as one can be by the idea of trying to conceptualize the "true" Indian (Chinese, Italian, or European) identity, the real issue at stake seems to be how the new elites in the emerging economies are debating about national identity and building a political project upon it—keeping in mind that the traditional notion of the elite (and of the masses) is very much challenged by globalization, and that, apart from the sidereal spaces of cosmopolitanism and the lower hell of parochialism, there are thousands of layers of differing forms of participation in the global society.

In this view, the focus of my analysis will be mainly on national identity, not in the sense of some sort of primordial identity, nor as a "natural product of human experience" determined by language, race, or history.<sup>8</sup> It will rather be in Gramscian terms, as an artificial, deliberately

---

<sup>6</sup>It is actually amazing to see how Indians and Chinese (and experts and scholars of both countries) perceive each other in terms of identity; for most Indians, national identity is mainly an Indian problem, while the Chinese would have an embedded sense of "Chineseness"; in the other camp, the perception is just the opposite.

<sup>7</sup>S. Hoffmann, *World Disorders*, Rowman & Littlefield Pub. Inc. Boston 2000, p. 193

<sup>8</sup>Ernst Renan's influential essay, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" dismisses one by one any primordial definition of the nation: neither a founding dynasty or a territory, nor a common race, language, or religion are considered "an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nationality." "A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity . . . A nation's existence is . . . a daily plebiscite" which is constantly nurtured by imagination: "the sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets." In *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi Bhabha, Routledge, 1990, pp 8-21.

“hegemonic” construct, a dynamic “imagined community” built by the organic elites, according to the specific historical context.<sup>9</sup>

The “anthropological” definition of nations as “imagined political communities”<sup>10</sup> by Benedict Anderson is quite close to this demystifying approach. Anderson does not regard nation-states as mere fabrications out of nothing. His emphasis on print capitalism as a site for coalescing ideas about nationalism and as a vector for their propagation exalts the role of the creators of the nation: those who had the education to imagine the new communities, according to the historical conditions and their own class-interest, as well as the economic means and the power to spread the product of their imagination—in Gramscian terminology, the elite, or the intellectuals of the dominant class.

### *The Influence of Gramsci on Indian Social Sciences*

The renewed influence of Gramsci on social and political studies around the world since the 1970s is well acknowledged. But his influence on Indian historiography truly changed the way in which Indian scholars studied their own history. Concepts like hegemony, passive revolution, organic intellectuals, civil society, historic bloc, and common sense, are a common thread in the so-called school of subaltern studies, which revered Orientalist and neo-Orientalist perspectives, producing alternative ideas of modernity and returning to the Indian masses and peasants, the “subalterns,” their place in history.<sup>11</sup>

“Migrated from Italy to India, the idea of a possible history of the ‘subalterns’ brought a critical vision of modern historiography, which proved to be a useful tool for the reconceptualization of old modernist notions of nation, citizenship, and democracy.”<sup>12</sup> It is not a matter of seeing Gramsci as a “prophet,”<sup>13</sup> but of recognizing the importance of his method and the categories of thought he articulated for the interpretation of Italian history and politics. Though historically defined, these categories are extremely useful for understanding hegemonic processes within contemporary national and transnational arrays of social forces and collective identities.

As a matter of fact, Gramsci’s conception of the state as “coercion plus hegemony” and of the struggle for power as “domination plus intellectual and moral leadership” is an essential tool for the analysis of social and political processes, involving dramatic transformations in the society, as in the case of the transition from colonial to post-colonial states.

---

<sup>9</sup>Z. Bauman, “Intervista sull’identita” *Laterza* 2006, pp. 19-23. Following a parallel pattern, the analysis of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger highlighted the importance of imagination for the mobilization of the masses, showing how traditions are invented and the past is created anew, with a constant effort at selective remembering and forgetting. On this point, see also the chapter on “Memory and Forgetting” in B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition, Verso 1983, London, pp. 187-206. And the history of any nation is marked by dark spots, areas that simply do not fit in the nationalist narrative: the massacre of native Indians in the United States, la “Nuit de Saint-Barthelemy” for France, the tragic mistakes of the British colonial administration in India leading to the massacres of “partition,” the importance of pro-Fascist sentiments in the 1930s in both the United Kingdom and the United States, and the recycling of the Fascist and Nazi bureaucracy in post-World War II Italy and Germany.

<sup>10</sup>P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2004, pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup>P. Chatterjee, “Oltre la Cittadinanza,” *Meltemi Roma*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>P. Chatterjee, “Le Monde diplomatique—Il manifesto,” February 2006.

<sup>13</sup>P. Gobetti, “Uomini e idee. Gramsci, La rivoluzione liberale,” 22 April 1924.

To Indian scholars, his analysis of the Italian Risorgimento<sup>14</sup> as a failed mass movement shows strong similarities with the Indian struggle for independence. It is from this perspective that one can understand, for instance, R. Guha's formula of the British colonial state as "domination without hegemony," and P. Chatterjee's analysis of the post-colonial state and its controversial relationship with the masses as incorporated in the nation, but alienated both from civil society and the real power.<sup>15</sup> Even more clearly on the specific topic of the construction of national identity, S. Kaviraj admits that: "the state of Indian history and historical consciousness [is] parallel to what Gramsci said about a similar phase of the invention of Italian nationalism....The nation, in India as much as in Italy, is a thing without a past. It is radically modern. It can look only for the subterfuges of antiquity."<sup>16</sup>

Two basic categories of Gramscian thought proved to be extremely useful: hegemony and the so-called organic intellectuals. The latter group is considered directly linked to the "dominant bourgeoisie" and plays a major role in hegemonizing society and securing its stability, through the development and sustaining "of the mental images, the technologies and the organizations, which bind together the members of a class into a common identity (and a common culture). Bourgeois intellectuals did this for a whole society in which the bourgeoisie was hegemonic."<sup>17</sup>

The parallels between the Risorgimento and the Indian struggle for independence cast a longer shadow. Chatterjee referring to Asok Sen's studies on I.C. Vidyasagar, an Indian social reformer of the nineteenth century, points to the absence of fundamental forces of transformation in Indian (Bengali) society in that century; the Bengali bourgeoisie "was not a fundamental class (in Gramscian terms)....and the cultural influence of intellectuals was reduced to an essentially abstract phenomenon."<sup>18</sup>

Chatterjee makes explicit reference to Gramsci and his analysis of the Italian Risorgimento in *Notes on Italian History*, utilizing the Gramscian concept of "passive revolution" to describe the situation in which the fundamental class (Indian bourgeoisie and its elites) opts for a gradual non-violent "molecular" transformation of the old society into a new one. The lack of the historical and social conditions and its own weakness obliged the Indian bourgeoisie to resort to the so-called "war of position," a gradual and reformist approach<sup>19</sup> for establishing hegemony within the society and the state.

The passive revolution exalts the role of intellectuals in creating a political and ideological framework, establishing possible alliances, and especially bringing "under the sway of a nationalist ideology and political program the overwhelming part of the popular elements of the nation." And Gramsci himself, from his prison cell, "blessed" Gandhi's passive resistance against the British, according the Indian political struggle a high degree of flexibility in mixing war of position, war of

---

<sup>14</sup>Literally, "resurgence," the nineteenth-century movement that led to the unification of Italy in 1861.

<sup>15</sup>Chatterjee, *Oltre* p.177.

<sup>16</sup>S. Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India, Subaltern Studies*, Vol. VII, Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>17</sup>S. Gill, edited by A. Gramsci, *Historical Materialism and International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations, Cambridge University Press 1993, pp. 50-57.

<sup>18</sup>P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis 2004, pp. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup>In Gramscian terminology, "war of position" is the alternative to "war of movement," exemplified by the French and Russian revolutions.



movement, and underground warfare, thus being paradigmatic of the “general form of the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial states in the twentieth century.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Gramsci’s thought provides a whole set of tools for deconstructing and understanding the correlation between consensus and power in a global context. His conception of civil society, for example, was at the same time pragmatic and idealistic; he recognized the failure of the socialist movements in Europe and in Italy to occupy civil society, which was instead colonized by the state.<sup>21</sup> Gramsci’s analysis of the weakness of Italian civil society as shapeless and chaotic brings to mind the current situation of the global civil society, oscillating between the extremes of ineffective spontaneity and domination by hegemonic thinking inspired by economic and political powers.

### ***Global Elites, Local Elites, and the Masses***

Who are the elites in the globalized world? And how is globalization shaping the process leading to the emergence of the new elites and their relationship with the masses?

K.H. Appiah<sup>22</sup> has attempted to explain why cosmopolitanism and hybridization, as well as the current processes of contamination between cultures, are essential for understanding the value of diversity as a fundamental principle of a new global ethics. He points at the new cosmopolitan culture as one of the most positive effects of globalization. One could not agree more, except that he speaks from the veranda of the Asante royal palace in Kumasi (Ghana), and the king greeting him will meet in a few weeks the with president of the World Bank in Washington; the same Ghanaian president belongs to this world, as a member of the royal Oyoko clan, and is, by the way, an Oxford graduate and a member of one of the London Inns of Court.

This reference is an example of the polarization of the human condition, the separation between the culture of the globalized elite and the “local” culture of the masses,<sup>23</sup> which Bauman considers to be one of the main products of globalization in his analysis of the rise of ethnic and religious violence in the world.

Along the same line, Jonathan Friedman defines the two different experiences of our globalized world as “hybridization” versus “ghettoization,”: the world of the cosmopolitan elite is basically built on the sole concept of time, without the limitations posed by borders, visas, economic constraints, knowledge of language; the “ghetto” of the “locals”—who live in space and are anchored to it— is instead the real battleground where all the problems deriving from globalization are concentrated, economic competition from emerging countries, unemployment, migrations, criminality, and the non-existence or unreliability of public services (health, education, transport, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Chatterjee (2004), pp. 48-51.

<sup>21</sup>A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Notebook 1, Note 130. For further reference see also C. Murphy, “Understanding IR: Understanding Gramsci,” *Review of International Studies* 1998: 24, pp. 417-25.

<sup>22</sup>K.H. Appiah., “The Case for Contamination,” *New York Times Magazine*, 1 January 2006.

<sup>23</sup>Bauman (2006), p. 22.

<sup>24</sup>J. Friedman, “Global Crises. The Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnics and Nationals in an Era of De-hegemonisation,” in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (eds), *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, Zed Books, London 1997, pp. 70-89.

An important aspect of this process is the increasing distance between politics and/or the institutions and the citizens; this seems the case not only in several European countries, like Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, but also in the United States, and in emerging countries like India and China, not to mention the love-hate relationship between Europeans and the EU. The elites and the political castes and bureaucracies are perceived more and more as self-referential, distant from the real problems of the people; and how could this perception be different as they all come from the same prestigious universities and circles, have similar social backgrounds, or, even worse, they belong to the same families, clans or tribes, sharing and transmitting power—be it a top bureaucratic job, a parliamentary seat, or even higher positions.<sup>25</sup>

The polarization of human experience and the distinction between the “globals” and the “locals” do not entirely correspond to our categories of elites and masses, and even less to the realms of politics and society; one of the main results of globalization is the emergence of new varied local elites, thanks to the electronic revolution, access to education and travel, exposure to Western influence, and the strengthening of domestic and transnational civil societies.

In my personal experience in 1992-1993 in Mogadishu, during the unfortunate United Nations (UN) intervention in Somalia, I was often confronted with the separation between the intriguing old Somali elite (truly cosmopolitan) and the absolute deprivation of their fellow countrymen, divided in an extremely intricate system of family clan, clan, sub-clans and tribes<sup>26</sup>; but the real and metaphoric distances between these entities were filled by all different layers of an emerging intelligentsia, with roles ranging from the heads of the armed militias to the leaders and sub-leaders of the different movements, parties, and NGOs.<sup>27</sup>

Going back to Anderson’s vision of nations as imagined communities: “What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half fortuitous, but explosive interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity.”<sup>28</sup> These factors are still at the heart of the debate regarding globalization and the nation-state, although they underwent essential transformations following the changes of the capitalist system, the astounding progress of science, technology, and the electronic revolution, the unprecedented ability of humans to communicate with each other, irrespective of linguistic and social barriers.

---

<sup>25</sup>Naturally, this is a very rough simplification, but it is exemplary of how the relationship with “those who have the power” is perceived. Quoting Francesco Guicciardini, the great Italian historian of the Renaissance, “E spesso tra ‘l palazzo e la piazza e’ una nebbia si’ folta e un muro si’ grosso, che’ non vi penetrano l’occhio degli uomini, tanto sa el popolo di quello che fa chi governa o della ragione perche’ lo fa, quanto delle cose che fanno in India.” Which simply means that between the people and the “palace” as a metaphor of power, there is a thick fog or a wall; thus, people can see and understand what the “palace” really do as they can understand what happens in India. I could not possibly resist the temptation to quote Guicciardini; his principal metaphor is accompanied by a second one representing India as the realm of the unknown, so distant that things happening there simply escape any possible comprehension.

<sup>26</sup>Just to give an example, the Somali warlord Aidid, who was the target of the unfortunate UN-U.S. policing operations in May-October 2003, was an Abr Ghedir (sub-clan Air), belonging to the biggest family clan of the Hawiya; his main enemy among the Somalis was Ali Mahdi, a member of the Abgal clan, also belonging to the Hawiya family clan, who concluded an alliance with the archrival family clan Darod. For more information about the UNITAF-UNOSOM operation in Somalia, see E. Augelli in *Global Governance*, 3 1994.

<sup>27</sup>Quite often, former students of Italian universities who, oddly enough, at the time of the confrontation with the UN and U.S. soldiers, resorted extensively to the instruments and language of European terrorist movements like the Italian “Brigate Rosse” or the German “Rote Armade Faktion.”

<sup>28</sup>Anderson p. 46; also quoted in Chatterjee (2004), p. 19.

All these dramatic changes question the same notion of elites and their role in building and maintaining the nation-state and its imagery.

Also from these points of view, Indian society represents a most fascinating variety—from the old Nehruvian secular elite, to the excellent academics in universities and research centers in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Ahmedabad in Gujarat, and Shantiniketan (the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore); from the fascinating cosmopolitans feeding the universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, to the excellent doctors and lawyers practicing mainly in English-speaking countries; from the creative intellectuals, writers, directors, and fashion designers, to the businessmen, engineers, and software entrepreneurs who played a major role in the rise of Silicon Valley and then of India as a software and services giant; but also, from the cunning politicians in Delhi to the leaders of regional and caste-based parties, from the idealist Gandhian activists to the religious/political leaders and sub-leaders of extremist organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Shiv Sena, and the semi-feudal lords of rural India.

Summarizing my methodological notes, I will now try to sketch a picture of the process of transformation, which involves the whole of Indian society, following three main set of ideas: the crisis of the nation-state, the emergence of new elites, and the building of a new national imagination(s) regarding Indian national identity as a possible hegemonic discourse. I will make use of a dichotomous approach, but without any personal conviction or commitment, because, in my personal experience, nothing is viewed as entirely black or completely white in India; facts and opinions have all kind of shades, and the same principle of noncontradiction, if it applies, just has a different meaning.



*Figure 6: Mahatma Gandhi spinning with Yeravda Charkha*



## II. India as a “Third-World” Superpower

### *Past, Present, and Future*

The increasingly popular concept of India as an economic superpower is not at all new. According to some studies, India and China were the largest economies in the world until the eighteenth century, with each of them counting for more or less 23 percent of the world’s GDP,<sup>1</sup> and with India considered the world’s leading manufacturer.<sup>2</sup>

The incredible riches of India are not a one-thousand-and-one nights tale; Indian empires, like the Maurya (322-185 B.C.) and the Gupta (250-550 C.E.) in the north of India, or Vijaynagar (1336-1646 C.E.) in current day Karnataka, or the same Mughal Empire (1556-1739 C.E.),<sup>3</sup> were important actors on the world economic stage, participating in a wide network of trade and commercial relations. But they were also true empires in the sense of diplomatic, political, and cultural influence, playing key roles in the spread of major religions and cultures—Buddhism (and Hinduism) to China and Southeast Asia and Islam in Asia through Indian Muslim traders/missionaries. In addition, the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana are still an essential part of popular culture and religious traditions in the whole of South and Southeast Asia.



Figure 7: *Bengal famine, 1943*, Gobardhan Ash (1907-1996), *Osian's*

“If we were once rich, why are we poor now?” asks a very young Gurcharan Das of his grandfather—an admirer of British colonial rule and administration—in his *India Unbound*. Actually, looking at the data, the impact of British rule on India seems to be truly devastating, both for the Indian manufacturing industry<sup>4</sup> (especially textiles) and for the countryside itself. There, the changes of the old land revenue system did not take into account the capriciousness of the monsoons, which are still essential for determining a good or bad harvesting season; and basically, thanks to the British reforms, farmers lost their ability to save and to protect themselves from famine.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Maddison, *L'Economie mondiale, statistiques historiques*, OECD, Paris 2003. Maddison’s data are widely used (see “The New Titans” in *The Economist* 14 September 2006) and disputed by economists, but can be considered the most reliable source for historical statistics.

<sup>2</sup>By 1820, just 50 years after the establishment of British rule, India was down to 16 percent and in 1950 to 3.8 percent.

<sup>3</sup>The annual revenues of the Mughal emperor in the second half of the seventeenth century were said to be ten times those of Louis XIV (le Roi-soleil). See G. Das, *India Unbound*, Penguin Books, London 2002, p. 56

<sup>4</sup>In 1830, India’s manufacturing industry accounted for 17.6 percent of the world’s industrial production (versus Britain at just 9.5 percent).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem* p. 61.

I will skip the debate about the plundering of Indian wealth and the deliberate destruction of the Indian manufacturing system following the industrial revolution; some of the postcolonial arguments concerning a deliberate strategy to destroy Indian industries give perhaps too much credit to the evil abilities of British administrators and economic planners, and not enough to the forces unleashed by the industrial revolution and its influence on world economy.<sup>6</sup>

I will quote just a fraction of the data about the more than 30 famines experienced in India during British rule (1765-1947), such as the one in 1860, which claimed more than 2 million victims; or those of 1865 and 1876, which decimated more than 10 percent of the population in the South; and the 1896 and 1943 famines, which killed a combined 9 million people. The Harvard University economist and Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, has investigated the causes of the great



Bengali famine of 1943, pointing at the cynicism and/or plain inefficiency of British administrators, whose priority was to safeguard the urban industrial class and Calcutta's food security—which was essential to guarantee Bengal war efforts—thus exponentially exacerbating the consequences of that famine for rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

Further, the fact that, since independence, India, with the small exception of the 1965-1966 food crisis, has experienced no famine at all

should serve as a reminder for all Indians, among them some of my older friends, who, like Gurcharan Das' grandfather, were somehow nostalgic about British order and efficiency. This fact, too, should serve as a reminder of how a mistaken narrative is recreated as "common sense," as events are remembered and narrated by Indian (urban) elites, while those truly affected by these events are left voiceless.

Economic planning and development was an essential feature of Indian postcolonial identity, following the 1938 founding of the National Planning Committee. The rigid system of planning and control of the economy from 1950 until 1980 further strengthened the pervasive public administration inherited by the Raj war effort, providing new impetus for the creation of a public industry, which took advantage of the very complex system of regulations governing the private sector (the so called Licence Raj).

The absence of economic and social reforms and the disappointing results of the fight against poverty and illiteracy, especially in the countryside, contributed to a general sense of failure for the Indian model, somehow confirmed by the "disappointing," but stable, Hindu rate of growth

---

<sup>6</sup>For further details about British economic policies, see G. Datt and K.P.M. Sundharam, *Indian Economy* S. Cahnd, New Delhi 2004.

<sup>7</sup>A. Sen, "The Great Bengal Famine," in *Poverty and Famines*, pp. 52-85. See also S. Bose and A. Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, Routledge N.Y. 2004, pp. 129-130.

of 3.5 percent (considering demographic trends, the growth rate per capita was 1 percent),<sup>8</sup> a failure that became more and more evident in the light of the Chinese and Southeast Asian economic miracles.

The payments crises of 1980 and 1991, the sharp decline of the Congress Party and of Rajiv Gandhi's system of patronage, but more importantly the radical changes in the world economy, all contributing to the blueprint for radical reform in the Indian economy, which, started by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1985, was pushed forward mainly by Narasimha Rao's government in 1991, with the depreciation of the rupee, the abolition of the Licence Raj, the privatization of some public industries (termed "disinvestment" to take into account workers and trade unions' sensitivity), and the liberalization, within certain limits, of foreign investments.<sup>9</sup>

Between 1991 and 2006,<sup>10</sup> India's annual average GDP growth was 6 percent,<sup>11</sup> with an outstanding 10.8 percent yearly increase in exports of goods and services and a radical shift in consumption patterns. GDP growth is determined mainly by internal demand (65 percent), and private consumption has been calculated as increasing by 5 percent yearly.

Just to quote some basic data about the Indian economy and its perspectives, in 2005 India was already the fourth largest economy in the world in purchasing power parity (PPP). Furthermore, according to some research, thanks to favorable demographics and investments in education and infrastructure, she is expected to be the world's top growth performer over the next fifteen years, with an average yearly growth of 6 percent projected (2006-2020), overtaking Japan and becoming the world's third largest world economy (in PPP) after the United States and China in 2020.<sup>12</sup> At the market exchange rate, India should become the world's third largest economy in 2040, only after China and the United States.

Thanks to reforms and rapid growth, India's economy and social structure are rapidly changing: in 1950, agriculture accounted for 58 percent of the nation's GDP; manufacturing was at 11 percent; and services 28 were percent. In almost 30 years (since 1980), there has been a drastic readjustment in favor of manufacturing (24 percent) and services (37 percent), while agriculture has decreased to 40 percent. In 2005, services were the main contributor to the GDP with a strong 49 percent, manufacturing remained stable after a slight increase of 3 percent between 1980 and 1990 (27 percent), while agriculture, since 2000, makes up only 24 percent of the Indian economy.

This scenario changes dramatically if we consider Indian employment structure. From 1950 to 2005, employment in agriculture decreased from 72 percent to 52 percent (with a steep acceleration since 1990), while manufacturing increased from 11 percent to 19 percent; as to the service sector, the employment share remained quite stable for 40 years from 17 percent (1950) to 21 percent (1990), with a sharp increase in the last decade and half to 28 percent (2005).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>J.J. Boillot J.J., *L'economia dell'India*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2006 pp. 25-27.

<sup>9</sup>Instrumental to the reforms were current premier Manmohan Singh, who was Minister of Finance and, above all, P. Chindambaran Minister of Commerce. G. Das, *India Unbound*, Penguin 2002, pp. 215-18.

<sup>10</sup>The performances vary widely: the period 1996-2002 is considered a time of lower growth, or stagflation (P.S. Jha conference at the Fairbank Center—Harvard University, 16 October 2006)

<sup>11</sup>Considering demographic trends, the per capita growth can be calculated at around 4 percent.

<sup>12</sup>There is a general agreement about the slowing of Chinese growth by 2010. Deutsche Bank, *India Special*, 19 May 2005. For slightly different forecasts, see also "The New Titans" in *The Economist* 14 September 2006.

<sup>13</sup>Boillot p. 52.



A whole different set of questions concerns the impact of economic growth on the lives of ordinary Indians, especially those belonging to the lower strata of the population. According to the World Bank (2005), 34.7 percent of the population is living on less than one dollar per day. But, if the poverty line is increased to two dollars per day, 79.9 percent<sup>14</sup> would be considered poor.<sup>15</sup> India now ranks 127<sup>th</sup> out of 175 on the UNDP Human Development Index, with almost half of the nation's children below the age of three considered underweight and with a growing incidence of anemia and undernourishment in small children and pregnant women.<sup>16</sup>

As far as literacy is concerned, since 1951, the literacy rate has increased from 18.3 percent to 65.4 percent, but only 40 percent of Indian children reach the fifth grade, while just 23 percent reach the seventh; and the situation is much worse for rural areas and for rural women, whose average literacy rate is 21 percent, even lower in poor states like Rajasthan (6.4 percent) and Bihar (11.8 percent).

The inadequacies of public infrastructures in India are described in the recent Indian Infrastructure Report (2007). Just to give some more data, 90 percent of rural households are not reached by telephone lines, 50 percent do not have power, and the remaining 50 percent can count on the provision of electricity for less than eleven hours per day (just seven hours during the monsoon season); finally, only 5 percent of rural households in states like Madhya Pradesh and Orissa and 10 percent in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have functioning latrines.

But even in rich or emerging states like Maharashtra—where Mumbai, India's economic and financial capital is located—and Andhra Pradesh (whose capital Hyderabad is now rivaling Bangalore as the information technology center of the nation) we can find striking contradictions, especially in the rural areas where impoverished farmers are routinely committing suicide.<sup>17</sup>

The pattern of peasants' suicides—at least 100,000 since 1997 according to official data—shows a different aspect of the Indian economic miracle, revealing the dark side of the liberalization policies of the past decade. Suicides are usually the result of huge debts with local moneylenders, often accumulated to dig wells for water, a situation exacerbated by bad monsoons and by the fact that the state is not building or maintaining even basic infrastructures like irrigation, energy, and potable water, and is cutting back on loans provided by public banks and financial institutions.<sup>18</sup>

As for some preliminary remarks, a simple comparison of these data shows a striking contradiction: India's economy looks very similar to industrialized countries like the United States, Japan, and the EU, but her employment structure makes her an agriculture giant, much more similar to China, with many features common to other underdeveloped countries. This picture poses several questions for the future—questions related to the future of agriculture, the excess of labor force in the countryside, the inadequacy of infrastructure, the poor performance of the education system, and

---

<sup>14</sup>These data more or less correspond to the current estimates regarding an Indian middle class of 250-300 million people.

<sup>15</sup>World Development Report (2006).

<sup>16</sup>*The Lancet*, Vol. 369, 28 April 2007, p. 1417.

<sup>17</sup>In the Maharashtra district of Vidarbha, there were 309 suicides between June 2005 and March 2006, while in Andhra Pradesh 400 farmers killed themselves between May and July 2004, and similar rounds of suicides took place in 1997-98 and 2000.

<sup>18</sup>V. Sridhar, "Why do farmers commit suicide?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 April 2006.

possible mass migrations towards cities, which are already among the most populated in the world and are crumbling in terms of material and social infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Indian Demographic Trends: Curse or Window of Opportunity?***

After independence, the annual growth rate of the Indian population was initially around 2.1 percent until 1991, then declined slightly to 2 percent (1991-2000); the gradual drop-off of the mortality rate made for a population increase of 322 million by 1981 and again a further increase of 344 million by 2000. According to several forecasts, the current rate of 2.5 children per woman should decline steadily, bringing the growth rate of India to 1.4 percent by 2050—which makes for an average yearly growth of 17-18 million. As a result, the Indian population should be 1.264 billion in 2016, overtaking China in 2030, and reaching, according to the UN, 1.5-1.6 billion in 2050.<sup>20</sup>

As to the age structure, according to the registrar general and census commissioner of India, “India’s youthful population in the age group of 20-29 years is expected to increase from 174 million in 2001 to 238 million in 2016,” which means an additional 64 million youngsters in fifteen years. Furthermore, out of the 371 million total increase of the population during 2001-2026, the active population (possible workers in the age group 15-59) is expected to account for 83 percent.<sup>21</sup>

This picture represents what the economists and demographers usually define as a demographic window of opportunity; the bullish attitudes of several institutions and research centers about the prospect of the Indian economy to 2030 and beyond have much to do with the fact that India will have the youngest population on the planet.<sup>22</sup> There is strong emphasis, too, on the need for ongoing reform—especially in the education system and in the labor market—to sustain growth and maximize the benefits of demographic trends.

In any case, the sheer size of the increase of India’s youthful population will present a serious challenge for policymakers in the central government and in the states. Moreover, an increase of 187 million is likely to occur in the so called BIMARU states (Bihar, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand—states where growth is already lagging, in decided contrast to the rich southern states),<sup>23</sup> increasing the North-South divide with possible economic, social, and political consequences.

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are among the poorest and most populated states in India. Uttar Pradesh is the largest state in terms of population and it presents a very complicated political web of alliances between the *Dalits* (the former untouchables), Muslims, now upper castes, and a semi-feudal rural political class. There have been recurrent riots among castes and between Hindus and Muslims, and it is increasingly clear that such vast amounts of young, unemployed, marginalized, and disenfranchised people represent an easy target for unscrupulous politicians and pose a threat to political stability under the already-challenged sense of law and order.

---

<sup>19</sup>According to some polls, 50 percent of the Indian rural population wants to migrate to the cities.

<sup>20</sup>UN Indian Demographic Data (2005).

<sup>21</sup>A. Bose, “Beyond Population Projections: Growing North-South Disparity,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 April 2007.

<sup>22</sup>Deutsche Bank, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Bose (2007).

As I have already noted, the makeup of the Indian economy is quite similar to developed countries, while its employment structure, related poverty, and poor education contribute to India's status as a developing country. It has been observed that the Indian model has almost no precedent; an agriculture-driven economy simply has leapt to a service-driven economy, without any intermediate passage through the development of the manufacturing sector. And the differentials between the past decade's GDP growth (6 percent) and the growth of the agricultural sector (2.2 percent) during the same period truly tells a tale of two Indias: "an India of booming businesses, growing cities, and a vibrant middle class, and an India of struggling agriculture, poor villages, and a large lower class."<sup>24</sup>

If we consider too the current demographic trends, we fully understand the challenges that the country will have to face in the near future. First of all, Indian agriculture cannot continue to play the role of a decompression chamber for excess Indian workers. Furthermore, its low productivity and small properties system (an average of two or three acres per farm) are simply unsustainable in the very competitive world agricultural markets.<sup>25</sup> Any reform designed to increase productivity and profitability in Indian agriculture will have to go through a major mechanization and distribution effort, which will in any case favor the concentration of land property and dramatically reduce the number of workers.

Services and manufacturing should, therefore, absorb not only the new entrants in the labor market, but also the excess work force from the countryside. Given current trends, and even considering the weight of the so-called informal sector<sup>26</sup> and its impressive expansion in the last decades, this will likely be very difficult unless there is a new manufacturing revolution and/or a gigantic program of infrastructure development.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, privatization of the remaining public companies, agricultural reform, and more flexibility in labor regulations are considered essential for maximizing the benefit of the demographic window of opportunity. There are, however, serious doubts whether this equation truly applies to the Indian case. First, the weight of the informal sector makes India's labor market de facto one of the most flexible in the world; second, the much-invoked reforms would, at least in the short-medium term, lead to tragic scenarios for large sectors of the impoverished working class, touching also upon some strata of the middle class. And India is a true democracy, where governments must try to take into account the interests of all sectors of society, as the failure of the Bharathya Janatha Party's (BJP) "shining India" campaign for 2004 elections has proven.<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically, the ill-conceived campaign—focused mainly on the successes of Indian economic growth and its burgeoning middle class—contributed to the winning United Progressive

---

<sup>24</sup>A. Varshney. "India's Democratic Challenge," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, Vol. 86, Issue 2, pp. 93-106.

<sup>25</sup>Considering also that India does not have the financial resources to subsidize agriculture as heavily as the U.S. and the EU do.

<sup>26</sup>According to conservative estimates, the informal sector in India represents 60-70 percent of the economy as a whole. It is clear that this factor has serious implications for Indian public finances and for the financing of the much-needed material and social infrastructures.

<sup>27</sup>According to the bullish forecasts of India's National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), the nation's thriving IT sector is expected to increase its work force from 106,000 in 2002 to 2,717,000 by 2012; during the same period, the number of people in business process outsourcing (BPO) is also expected to increase from 170,000 to 972,000.

<sup>28</sup>The coalition in power, led by the BJP, lost the 2004 general elections also because of an ill-conceived campaign mainly focused on the successes of Indian economic growth and its burgeoning middle class.

Alliance (UPA) coalition “common minimum program,” which is trying to reconcile the pursuit of the liberalization process with measures in favor of the sectors and layers of the population, especially in the rural areas, hit the hardest by neo-liberalist policies.

India can be seen as having failed in fostering an industrial revolution. This means that she was not able to develop the kind of social and civic immunity that characterizes Western societies, in terms of effective trade unions and their links with political parties and pressure groups, working- and middle-class consciousness, and prioritization of sustainable development. In this connection, the weight of the informal sector—which, according to some estimates, currently employs 85-90 percent of the Indian work force—is just one of the signs of an unresolved relationship between economic and social growth and of the enduring tensions between the state and the private sector, which directly concerns the new Indian middle class and its prevailing anti-state rhetoric.

I will revert to this point in the conclusion. It is important, however, to stress how a true political, social, and cultural revolution accompanied modernization processes in the Western societies, either through violence or through gradual reforms fostered by alliances among the state, politics, and civil society. The middle class played a major role in forging this alliance, which was essential in sustaining equitable growth, especially in Europe.



*Figure 9: Raj Kapoor in Shree 420*



### **III. The New Garbs of Indian Modernity**

#### ***Cities vs. Countryside***

A recurring impression featured in neo-Orientalist<sup>29</sup> literature dedicated to Bombay (now Mumbai) describes an arrival at the Shivaji Airport, where the narrator's character is simply overwhelmed by the sights and sounds (and smells) of India. This also happened to me, and I had the misfortune, or luck, of landing during a *bandh* declared by the Shiv Sena.<sup>30</sup> My driver was obliged to avoid the new highway—built at the end of the 1990s—and take the old road, which runs close to Dharavi, perhaps the greatest slum in the world (housing 8 million people), and the so-called red-light district of Falkland Road. From the safe window of a distant car, I glimpsed the complexity and contradictions of not only Mumbai, but of the country as a whole.

Cities truly reproduce Indian diversity, charting historical flows of migration, as can be found in the Mumbai and Delhi quarters and slums inhabited by self-organized communities from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, and Kerala, with their own temples and rituals dedicated to regional gods and goddesses. But cities are also the places where Indian diversity collapses, as happened in Mumbai, the topography of which was drastically redrawn first in the 1940s for the departure of the majority of its cosmopolitan Muslim community, and later following the December 1992-January 1993 riots, which further divided the Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities.

After a few months, when I was feeling slightly more knowledgeable, most of my new Indian friends began telling me that I could not possibly know anything about the country: Mumbai was not the real India, “the heart of India is in the countryside, in rural India.”

The dichotomy between the cities and the countryside has been a constant in the debate about Indian identity, and the movement back and forth between the village and the city remains essential to the experience of Indian modernity and the quest for a renewed relationship with tradition. Social reformers and the first nationalists came mostly from the urban elite. At the same time, the main object of their thoughts and actions, besides getting rid of the British,<sup>31</sup> was actually rural India, her immense poverty, her underdevelopment, and her prevailing social prejudices. The involvement of the peasants in the struggle for independence has been an ongoing concern for the leadership of the nationalist movement, who had to wait until the arrival of the Mahatma Gandhi to connect their own education and urban political background to the sensibility of the rural masses. The contrast between urban and rural elites was also a part of the unsuccessful—if ever truly attempted—economic and social reforms of Nehru, and, as stated previously, one among the

---

<sup>29</sup>A considerable part of the recent literature dedicated to India (and Asia in general) could be considered neo-Orientalist for its love of the exotic and sense of bewilderment, which are frequently coupled with Western-bias reconstructions of Indian society and culture.

<sup>30</sup>A *bandh* is a labor strike of sorts usually declared for political reasons, forbidding work of any type; depending on the organization, power, and attitudes of the party/trade union declaring the *bandh*, it can be quite dangerous to travel by car. The Shiv Sena (literally the army of Shiva) is a political party—founded by Bal Tackeray, a former cartoonist—with a strong xenophobic and anti-Muslim program.

<sup>31</sup>The idea of an independent India crystallized among the intellectuals only in the second half of the nineteenth century.

reasons behind the 2004 defeat of the BJP-led coalition, whose “Shining India” slogan was mainly conceived for a urban middle-class audience<sup>32</sup> with very little appeal for the countryside.

According to the UN (2003), three out of the twenty most populated cities in the world are in India: Mumbai 17.4 million; Delhi 14.1; Calcutta 13.8. In 2015, Mumbai and Delhi should become the second and third largest cities in the world, with a population of 22.6 million and 20.9 million, respectively, while, at the current rate, Calcutta should grow to 16.8 million.<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon concerns all of India, a country of 600,000 villages, where village community is very much a symbol of Indian culture, but where the number of cities with populations of more than 1 million saw an outstanding growth in the 1990s from 23 (1991) to 35 (2001)—and where in 2026 there should be at least ten cities boasting populations of more than 10 million people.<sup>34</sup>

The official numbers do not fully grasp the reality of the urbanization phenomenon in India,<sup>35</sup> a movement that defies statistics: migrants usually sleep in the streets, or, if they can afford it, find inexpensive accommodations in the slums, which, in the past twenty years, have become sort of working/middle-class neighborhoods. Some calculations estimate that 2 million people relocate annually from the countryside to the cities, and almost half of them find some sort of accommodation and/or employment in Delhi or Mumbai.<sup>36</sup>

The real revolution in the relationship between urban and rural spaces seems to be happening right now. Some analysts foresee that in 2026, Indian cities will have a population of 520 million, with an urbanization rate of 45 percent,<sup>37</sup> which can only mean an exodus from the countryside that is almost unprecedented in the history of mankind.

A considerable part in this revolution is being played by the so-called “golden quadrilateral,” a network of highways 3,625 miles long, which will link the four main cities<sup>38</sup> of India (Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, and Chennai [the British Madras]) through thirteen states. While the eastern and western sides of the quadrilateral run parallel to the coasts, the northern and southern side bifurcate the northern and southern regions reproducing a sort of smaller India (the quadrilateral), where one finds the majority of Indian agricultural land. On a map, the golden quadrilateral is visually striking, giving the impression of the fortifications of an army laying siege to the heart of rural India; and it is clear that the new highways will impact, deeply, the lives of Indian peasants.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>As a matter of fact, the Asian miracle is mostly described as an urban miracle: in higher-income countries, 85 percent of the GDP originates from the cities; in lower-income countries, this figure is at least 55 percent. And this is perfectly understandable in a process in which the weight of agriculture in the economy is becoming smaller and smaller, replaced by manufacturing and services, which are mostly located in urban areas.

<sup>33</sup>UN World Urbanization Prospect: 2003 Revised database.

<sup>34</sup>There is also strong competition among cities to attract investment especially in IT and BPO. See, for instance, the rapid rise of Hyderabad in these sectors, which is somehow threatening the supremacy of Bangalore.

<sup>35</sup>But also from this perspective, there is a clear difference between India and the rest of the world. In the past 15 years, India’s urbanization rate has been increasing at a much slower pace than, for instance, East Asia: from 25 percent in 1990 to 28.3 percent in 2005, compared with the staggering East-Asian increase from 28.8 to 40.2 percent during the same period.

<sup>36</sup>B. Stokes, “India’s Paradox,” *National Journal* 7 April 2007, Vol. 39, pp. 32-37.

<sup>37</sup>Boillot, p. 48

<sup>38</sup>As well as rising cities like Bangalore, Ahmedabad (in Gujarat), Bhubaneswar (in Orissa), and Jaipur.

<sup>39</sup>See the four excellent articles by Amy Waldman, *New York Times* 4-7 December 2005.

The traditional links between the countryside and the cities—built through a continuous line of villages and small cities developing along the road—as well as the resulting local economies, are being disrupted; ancestral homes have been destroyed and more than 20,000 acres of land have been confiscated. Furthermore, through transient traffic and the spread of prostitution along the highways, diseases, petty criminal acts, and violence are also spreading in the villages.

But the other side of the coin is represented by the shrinking distance between urban and rural societies, with migrants acting as mediators, “bringing back new views and aspirations” as well as new needs and a new entrepreneurial drive in the villages.<sup>40</sup> And clearly the mobility of the migrants and the anonymity afforded by the big cities affect Indian social structure and the caste system, owing to difficulties in respecting prescriptions of purity outside the village, having to share accommodations and food with unknown people, and to the constraints of city life and of a new working environment.

The caste system, however, is finding ingenious ways to reproduce its logic—for instance through the so-called sanskritization<sup>41</sup> and the ability of some privileged castes or religious groups (for instance the Marwaris, the Jains, or to some extent the Parsis) to maintain a strong sense of community by creating social circles in urban enclaves that are almost inaccessible to aliens.<sup>42</sup> As I have already noted, in the more popular areas, one can find quarters reflecting the different waves of migration, all trying to reproduce village life and regional cultures in the main cities.

In the 1960s, Pier Paolo Pasolini lamented the homogenization of Italian culture, following the so-called “economic boom.” He saw the dangers of the mass media, especially television, which actually imposed the use of Italian against local dialects and languages, and a mass Italian culture against local traditions and cultures.

Hindi-pop and the ubiquitous Bollywood songs and movies are becoming a sort of common background cadence of Indian life in the cities, and this popular culture is expanding to the countryside, finally promoting the spread of Hindi against local languages. Also the wedding ceremony—for the average Indian still the most important event in his or her social life—is more and more massified, adopting colorful Northern Indian traditions popularized by mainstream cinema and the mass media; and the same transmission of religion and rituals is gradually becoming more and more standardized in spite of Hinduism’s astoundingly diverse traditions.

There are those who believe that these transformations are only superficial, and that Indian culture and traditional values are still very strong. Only values in line with the tradition would be incorporated through the social mechanisms of acceptance and assimilation or rejection; therefore, the impact of globalization and the negative aspects of consumerism should not be overestimated, because what can be seen emerging now is a new culture—as expressed by a new elite, rooted in the past, but with an original system of syncretic values.

---

<sup>40</sup>Waldman, *New York Times* 7 December 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Sanskritization is the process by which castes lower in the hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. See next chapter.

<sup>42</sup>During my search for a residence in Mumbai in 2002, I visited several apartments in these enclaves, which are in some of the nicest areas of the city. But I was never able to enter into any serious negotiation, either on grounds of internal regulations (allowing, for instance, only Parsis to rent apartments in that area, which belonged to a Parsi trust) or on a cultural basis, as the owner and other residents would prohibit the occupation of the apartment by a non-vegetarian.



## *Urban and Rural Imagination*

I am back to my friends gently mocking me for not understanding that the real heart of India is in the countryside rather than in the big cities like Mumbai. They are right and wrong for many different reasons. As noted, the divide between urban and rural society is at the core of the Indian struggle for independence, and the idea of modernity in India dwells on a symbolic contrast within the elites of the Congress Party and Indian intelligentsia. Nehru's vision of a new Indian identity based on industrialization and economic development was simply incompatible with Gandhi's sanctification of village life as the real heart of India; and Gandhi's idyllic vision was severely criticized by B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution as well as of *Dalit* political consciousness, who considered the villages as dens "of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism."

Gandhi's vision—which, naturally, had a strong appeal for the rural masses—was somehow indebted to the Orientalist view of India's identity, one mainly based on spirituality and rejection of materialism and Western modernity. His message was instrumental in reorienting Congress priorities towards the countryside, thus breaking the hegemony of the party's urban elites. For Gandhi, *swaraj* (self-rule) and rejection of the Western model of development were deeply linked, convinced as he was that the regeneration of India should go through the personal regeneration of her people and "through the handiwork of each individual Indian in their quotidian habits of production and consumption,"<sup>43</sup> which were basically those of a pre-industrial society.

The death of Gandhi and the determination of Nehru and the post-colonial elites helped reshape a new vision of India's future based exclusively on the language of economic development, a language developed by urban upper-caste elites, but addressed also to the countryside through the rhetoric of the "temples of the future."<sup>44</sup> The agrarian elites, basically re-created by British rule, were separated from the urban elites in terms of conflicting ideology, but were still holding the real power in the countryside through mechanisms of caste affiliation and economic subjugation. Furthermore, a common educational background and the existing social and caste links facilitated the emergence of common interests.<sup>45</sup>

Over the past 30 years, a significant part of the newly urbanized Indian middle class has come from the countryside, thanks to the successes of the "green revolution"<sup>46</sup> and the ability of rural and "rural-turning-urban" elites to merge economic and caste interests in powerful parliamentary lobbies, preserving, for instance, import duties and subsidies for sugar and rice. At the same time, it is not yet clear to what extent the land laborers are benefiting from this process, which seems firmly placed in the hands of the rural landlords.

---

<sup>43</sup>S. Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1999, p. 73.

<sup>44</sup>And it is relevant that the aforementioned film *Mother India*, directed by Mehboob Khan and mainly dedicated to village life and the suffering of a peasant family, ends with the celebration of the "temples of the future" (in this case, dams and irrigation canals).

<sup>45</sup>Actually, an unlikely chemistry between urban and rural elites came about at the expense of land reforms and redistributive justice, completing the metamorphosis of the Congress Party into a patronage machine relying heavily on the rural vote-banks and traditional systems of power. Khilnani pp. 65-80.

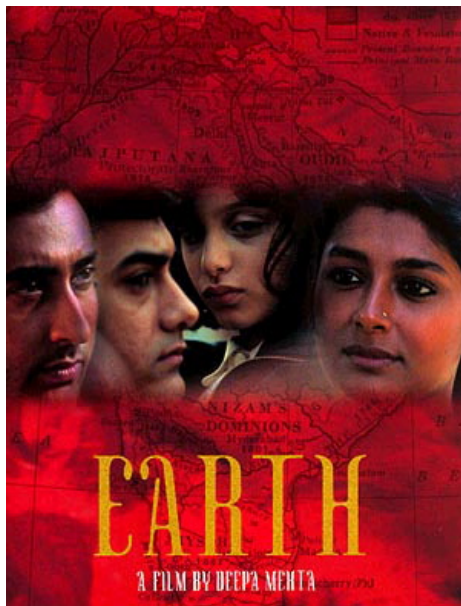
<sup>46</sup>This policy was introduced at the end of the 1960s in the countryside, promoting mechanization, concentration of land, and favoring specific crops through a system of subsidies and price incentives.

The importance of the rural vote-banks, however, and the over-representation of rural interests is still one of the main characteristics of Indian politics,<sup>47</sup> as shown by the recent elections in Uttar Pradesh, the most populated state in India, counting for more than 80 out of the 543 seats in the Indian Parliament.

I will come back to the results of this election. The victory of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), representing mainly the interests of *Dalits* in Uttar Pradesh—could be interpreted as the result of a “working class” alliance between *Dalits*, Muslims, and upper and (partly) lower castes, forged in the name of the defense of rural interests. At the same time, the success of the BSP was the product of its remarkable ability to build a common agenda between the cities and the villages; and it confirmed how the borders between urban and rural society are blurring, thanks to the emergence of new local elites, who seem much more pragmatic, with their background and experiences allowing a wider margin of flexibility.

Finally, Indian culture has always been a faithful mirror of the city/village divide; post-colonial social-realist literature sided with Nehru and Ambedkar, with authors like Mulk Raj Anand, B. Bhattacharya, and K. Markandaya, and again *Mother India* tries a difficult compromise with mixed praise for rural life, weakened at the end with the glorification of Nehru’s “temples of the future.”<sup>48</sup> At the same time the tradition of Bengali cinematic greats Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak was somehow neutral, concentrating on the drama and hardship of both urban and rural society. Also from this point of view, Rabindranath Tagore, in his novels and his life, was exemplary, divided as he was between cosmopolitan Calcutta and rural India, where he located his most ambitious and controversial project, the open-air school and university of Shantiniketan.

Of course, if one looks at the current mainstream culture exemplified by Bollywood cinema and cosmopolitan Indian writers, the space of rural India in the new imagination seems at best folkloric; one of the most successful new Indian directors bluntly admitted that he could not care less about villages and that his movies were mainly conceived for the urban audience.<sup>49</sup> But there are also authors like Vishal Bharadwaj, whose excellent Shakespearean translations of *Macbeth* in the darkest imaginable Mumbai of the Muslim mafia (*Maqbool*), and *Othello* in the feudal politics of rural Uttar Pradesh (*Omkara*) show a much more complex picture of Indian modernity.



For Sunil Khilnani, Indian cities are truly the “places where the idea of India is being disputed and defined anew”; they are the incubators of all conflicts and fractures in Indian social fabrics, but also where different Indian communities and religions learn to share the space and live peacefully together, as in pre-1947 Lahore on the eve of “partition,” as described by Bapsi Sidhwa in her *Cracking India*—translated by Deepa Mehta in the beautiful *Earth*, through the eyes of the young

<sup>47</sup>A. Varshney, *Democracy Development and Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>48</sup>This was the expression used by Nehru for big infrastructural projects like dams, roads, and irrigation canals, which were supposed to change the landscape of rural India.

<sup>49</sup>Karan Johar, director of many Bollywood blockbusters.

Parsi Lenny, whose most exhilarating experience is, however, her day trip to the rural Muslim village of her cook's relatives.

### *The Resurrection of the Caste System*

In 1950, the Indian Constitution repudiated the hierarchical design of the caste system, abolishing any kind of discrimination based on it. Economic development and the progress in the opening of the country in the past 25 years made some leading sociologists believe that the caste system was in a seemingly irreversible crisis.<sup>50</sup> Apparently, the joint impact of urbanization and industrialization are shattering caste barriers, albeit slowly; according to a very recent BBC poll, more than half of the Indian population (55 percent) believes that the caste system is a barrier to social harmony, thus confirming the immanence of caste seclusion in Indian society.

But even without considering the situation of states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, or Rajasthan, where politics are driven by the caste factor, or Kerala where non-Hindu institutions like the Catholic Church or the Communist Party are organized on a caste basis, evidence of the system's continued existence can be found in the classified advertisements in the Sunday editions of the main newspapers in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Calcutta; the marriage and engagement announcements are divided by caste, with the caste of the prospective bride/groom, then the listings of physical characteristics (among them very often "fair skin"), and qualifications.

*Devdas*, a short Bengali novel published in 1917 by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, is still arguably one of the most popular pieces of Indian literature, dramatized in no less than seven movies in various Indian languages. Bimal Roy's 1955 version (Figure 10) still stands as a true and minds of many depiction, by Sanjay the cast Shah Rukh young hero of Hindi *Devdas*, a *Zamindar*,<sup>52</sup> childhood friend Paro belongs to a lower caste. caste loyalty and family cannot marry Paro and alcoholic dying at the door of her house. The



*Figure 10 : A scene from Bimal Roy's Devdas (1955)* movie was the biggest hit of 2002 and saw tens of thousands of Indians openly crying in the cinemas with a sense of participation and compassion that made you wonder about the power of the story and its resonance to contemporary Indian ears and hearts.

---

<sup>50</sup>A. Beteille, "Caste and Family in Representation of Indian Society," *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 8, No. 1, February 1992

<sup>51</sup>Perhaps the most expensive Indian movie ever (but, in my view, the 1955 version by Bimal Roy (Figure 10) is a true masterpiece).

<sup>52</sup>More or less corresponding to the upper caste or Brahmin; the word means actually intermediary. When the British reformed the fiscal system at the end of the eighteenth century, they recognized local upper (mainly) castes as landowners, in exchange for the duty to collect taxes in the rural areas.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to deal in detail with the different theories of the caste system and its origin, from the controversial parallel with our conception of class, sanctioned by religious justification, to the historical reconstructions about the consequences of the Aryan invasion and the subjection of the indigenous populations as lower castes/untouchable. Most of the theories do not adequately address the complexity of the system or the way it evolved throughout India, adapting to different local circumstances.

Louis Dumont's once hegemonic theory of caste as a sacralized social order,<sup>53</sup> built on the concept of purity<sup>54</sup> and the separation of status and power (as evident in the superiority of the priest Brahmins towards the warrior/kings *Kshatriya*), is now widely disputed, though still considered the more articulated and complex theoretical explanation of the system. Some critics have argued that Dumont's reconstruction did not take into account the enormous diversity of Indian traditions in terms of social structure, as his work was based on the "village studies model"; questioned too was the interpretation of caste as the single most important key to understanding Indian society.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the school of subaltern studies has shown the complexity of Indian society and the vast array of contributions and cultures that thrived in the sub-continent until the eighteenth century. And Dumont's theory was considered a valid explanation of Brahminical thought, but did not really explain the functioning of Indian society before the arrival of the British; and there are very good arguments supporting the thesis that the fiscal system and civil service policies introduced by the Raj, coupled with the British obsession for classifications, regenerated the caste system as a lynchpin of Indian society.

These critiques put into question the immanence of castes in Indian society for the past 5,000 years, as well as the widely shared conventional assumption that this institution was the main foundation of Indian identity. According to several scholars,<sup>56</sup> it seems quite clear that, as a matter of principle, the system was much less rigid and much more based on philosophies of integration and collaboration between the different castes. Furthermore, upward and downward mobility was a constant feature of the system, also taking the form of the creation of new castes and sub-castes.<sup>57</sup> The Raj's prioritization of control<sup>58</sup> and extraction of revenues plus the commendable aspiration to a better understanding of Indian society—as well as the development in Europe of a more scientific approach to human and social sciences—led to the decision to hold the first census of the Indian population in 1871. The census enumerated and classified castes, sub-castes, and communities, a practice that went on every ten years until 1931 with the collaboration of renowned anthropologists and of indigenous upper-caste informants, who played a major role in building an imagined Indian society whose main institution was the caste system.

The influence of the informants on this process, and their quality and biases, marked a peculiar continuity in the depiction of Indian society by traditional Brahminical sources as

---

<sup>53</sup>Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Gallimard, Paris 1966.

<sup>54</sup>The concept of impurity mostly refers to occupations linked with the organic aspects of life, for instance, the slaughtering of animals, working with leather, or even the profession of barber.

<sup>55</sup>Beteille (1992).

<sup>56</sup>Bernard Cohn was the first author to highlight the role of the census in the building of caste identities. For a detailed analysis of this subject, see also Appadurai (2001), pp. 149-76.

<sup>57</sup>R.B. Bhagat, "Caste Census, Looking Back, Looking Forward," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 May 2007.

<sup>58</sup>Enumeration of castes was also instrumental for recruitment in the army and identification of sub-castes/tribes as criminals.



organized along the hierarchy of purity, “and this has led to the view that ritual factors predominate in determining social stratification as manifested through the caste system.” Furthermore, this has “resulted in an obsession with the pure and the impure and with the view that the ritual domain encompasses the economic and political domain,” a reconstruction that is considered highly biased and does not hold any more for understanding the organization of real life in ancient India.<sup>59</sup>

One point of great interest, which would also deserve more attention, is the enduring fascination of Western intellectuals for this institution. In some cases, this became ambiguity or even sheer admiration, as with the Italian Jesuit de Nobili, an aristocrat who found himself perfectly at ease with the castes and devised a successful strategy for the conversion of the upper castes, convinced as he was that in a hierarchical society like India, the lower castes would follow the examples of the higher; or, much more recently, the studies of scholars like Alain Danielou, who was convinced of the superiority of the caste system, as it gives everybody his own place in the society—and an ethical and religious reason that justifies hierarchy—thus avoiding all the griefs and dangers of our equalitarian culture, within which nobody is ever content with who he is and what he does.

The perception of “castes as a special form of social classes, present in every society,”<sup>60</sup> is widely shared in Western analysis. Castes are interpreted as a case of class characterized by absolute rigidity, and there were those who compared caste with racial and ethnic discrimination, making the case of racial relations in the 1960s United States: isn’t Stanley Kramer’s *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* all about the two main taboos of the caste system, endogamy and commensality?

The same ambiguity can be found in some of the notables of the Congress Party as well as and the father of Indian independence; Gandhi’s attitude toward the untouchables was, at best, paternal, as he was convinced of the inherent justification of the caste system,<sup>61</sup> which for him “was not based primarily on a hierarchical principle . . . each caste fulfilled a socio-economic function that helped guarantee the harmony of the whole.”<sup>62</sup> Quoting from him, “*Varnashram* is inherent in human nature and Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science.” Caste is ascribed at birth and refusing to live by one’s caste “is to disregard the law of heredity.”<sup>63</sup>

For the purpose of my research, I will highlight the following few basic points about caste: the distinction between members of the caste and those outside the caste system, including the untouchables<sup>64</sup> and those belonging to different religions such as Parsis, Muslims, and Christians (the position of Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs, is somehow different as they are often considered a part

---

<sup>59</sup>U. Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and the Brahmanas of “Ancient India,”* Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 59-68.

<sup>60</sup>Dumont (1966), quoting Kroeber’s *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (Vol. III, 1930, 254b-257a)

<sup>61</sup>See the controversy with Ambedkar about the granting of a separate constituency for the untouchables.

<sup>62</sup>C. Jaffrelot, “The Impact of Affirmative Action in India: More Political than Socio-economic,” *India Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2006, p.175.

<sup>63</sup>*Varnashram* is the transliterated Sanskrit word for the caste system. *Mahatma Gandhi Collected Works*, Vol. XXI, Publication Division, Delhi 1972, pp. 242-50.

<sup>64</sup>There is some confusion about the inclusion or exclusion of untouchables from the caste system; technically they are outside the four *varnas*, but as communities, often specialized in works related to the above-mentioned organic aspects of life.

of the Hindu tradition)<sup>65</sup>; the conceptual difference between the *Varnas*, the four general classifications of the system, and the real functioning of the 4,000-5,000 castes, which are mainly linked with actual professions and job occupations and/or origin from the same ancestor or territory<sup>66</sup>; the separation between upper castes (the so-called twice born<sup>67</sup>) and lower castes,<sup>68</sup> but also between the dominant caste and dependent castes in a certain territory, where caste hierarchies are often reversed, and which is very important for understanding rural power dynamics.<sup>69</sup>

### *Class vs. Caste*

Of great interest for my research is the intertwining of class and caste, which has become more and more evident in the past twenty years with the impact of economic development and globalization affecting different sections of Indian society in very different ways, triggering new dynamics in the unresolved relationship between “Western” modernity<sup>70</sup> and “Indian” traditions. This is evident, for example, in the global success of Indian engineers and programmers, who mostly belong to upper castes, or in the paradoxical results of reservation policies for lower castes.

The intertwining of class and caste has been and remains, albeit in a different form, a key issue in Indian economics and politics, especially for building a middle- and working-class consciousness and vision of the future. Gail Omvedt has located this process in the broader framework of the class/caste relationship within Indian history. In her analysis, Indian feudalism was shaped on caste/class assimilation, while colonial transformations and the development of capitalist agricultural relations broke this correlation: “class and caste are no longer absolutely correlated: economic differentiation has affected almost every caste.”<sup>71</sup> In this connection, class mobilization is even more difficult now due to caste/ethnicity drawing power, which is also a major vector of fragmentation tendencies.

---

<sup>65</sup>Two points of great interest are the position of untouchables as a part of the system and the resilience of castes in other religions as well, in particular Sikhism and Christianity, where the religious practices of particular sects and churches are commonly based on caste seclusion.

<sup>66</sup>The root of the word *jati* is the same as that for “birth”. In 1901, 1,646 *Jatis* were identified by the census; this increased to 4,147 in the 1931 census (including 300 Christian and 500 Muslim castes). The census has been used by the Mandal Commission to estimate the consistency of the different castes: the upper castes represent 16.1 percent of the Indian population; the lower castes (Other Backward Castes [OBC]) 43.7 percent; the *Dalits* (Scheduled Castes [SC]) 14.9 percent; the tribals (Scheduled Tribes [ST]), 8.1 percent; and the non-hindu minorities (Christian, Parsis, Muslims and others) 17.2 percent. The People of India Project launched by the Anthropological Survey of India in 1985 identified 4,635 castes and/or communities in India.

<sup>67</sup>Upper castes—Brahmins (priests), *Kshatriya* (kings/warriors), and *Vaishya* (merchants)—have initiation rituals that are considered a second birth.

<sup>68</sup>*Shudra* (servants/farmers/workers), who very roughly correspond to the category of the OBC and represent more or less half of the Indian population.

<sup>69</sup>This distinction is essential to understand not only the real functioning of the caste system, but also the dynamics of rural power and caste politics. In his *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay 1962, M.N. Srinivas indicated six attributes of dominant castes: sizeable land, number of people, high place in the local hierarchy, Western education, jobs in the administration, and urban sources of income.

<sup>70</sup>See for instance the position of Max Weber and Gunnar Myrdal about the caste system as an obstacle to progress and economic development.

<sup>71</sup>At least until the 1970s, this meant that lower castes and untouchables were often joined by upper castes in the rural proletariat. G. Omvedt, *Capitalist Agriculture and Rural Classes in India, in Class, State and Development in India*, Ed. B. Berberoglu, pp. 82-138, New Delhi, 1992.

This subject has been widely debated within the Congress Party. Nehru<sup>72</sup> and his fellows of the socialist wing of the party came mainly from the upper castes, but they were convinced that castes would not survive the building of a modern economy and would be soon replaced by a “modern” Western-like class dynamic. This attitude was exemplified by Nehru’s position on the First Backward Classes Commission, established in 1953, which proposed quotas for lower castes in the education system and in public administration, as was already the case for the untouchables. The rejection of the final Report of the Commission was motivated by a vision of India’s development following a “socialist pattern,” which would make “social and other distinctions . . . disappear,” and by the possible drawback of “penalizing the most capable people . . . and hindering efficiency in the administration and business.”<sup>73</sup>

If Nehru’s good faith—and that of a few others—seems undisputable, the general attitude of the elite of the Congress Party, who came mostly from the upper castes, seems to reflect his own social belonging and the concern of Indian middle classes. As I have already noted, the first decades of independent India showed the resilience of the caste system and its undercurrent, shaping the relations between the state and its citizens, with the upper castes colonizing independent India’s civil society as the new middle class and becoming an essential part of state industry and public administration.<sup>74</sup>

The post-colonial Indian middle class transformed itself rapidly, in Gramscian terms, as a “fundamental class,” thus contributing to the forging of the hegemonic Nehru-Gandhi ideology; and, as with any fundamental class, its main task was the defense of its own economic interests.<sup>75</sup> In the background of this hegemonic thinking, caste interests and hierarchies can also be found. There was no real need to reaffirm them; upper castes were already leading Indian society, and even those at the margins could be easily accommodated with decent jobs in the civil service and/or public industries. “In theory, the caste system was rejected as a relic of the past . . . In practice, however, the middle class remained upper caste in character.”<sup>76</sup> And the aspirations of lower castes, exemplified by the process of sanskritization,<sup>77</sup> shows how strong was the appeal of upper-caste status in the cultural and social imagination as well as in economic promotion and security.

The cleavage between elite and mass colonial politics—temporarily united by Gandhi in the Congress Party—was frozen for almost three decades after independence through the imperatives of economic development and social emancipation, which were translated in independent India identity, but not in her governance.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup>Nehru belonged to a Kashmiri Brahmin family. He was called Pandit Nehru, with reference to the Sanskrit word for “learned,” used mostly for Brahmins.

<sup>73</sup>Declarations by the Home Minister, G.B. Panth, quoted in Jaffrelot.

<sup>74</sup>Among the dominating upper castes within the independent India middle class, there are the old Bengali elite (Probasi and Bhadralog), Punjabi Khadris, Kashmiri Pandits, South India Brahmins, and urban-professional castes such as the Gujarat Najars and the Maharashtra Chitpavans. Furthermore, the enduring influence of the Parsi community and of the higher strata of the Muslim and Christian communities must also be borne in mind. P.K. Varna, *The Great Indian Middle Class*, Penguin 1998, p. 27

<sup>75</sup>Through, for instance, the indefinite postponement of the quota system for lower castes and of the much-awaited land reform.

<sup>76</sup>Varma (1998), p. 44.

<sup>77</sup>I will come back to this process, which consists basically of research by the lower strata of the society into the possibility of upper-caste forebears.

<sup>78</sup>See also Patterjee (1998).

Until approximately the 1970s, there was an Indian middle class divided between urban elites, involved in the public sector at large, and rural landlords or inheritors of the *Zamindari*<sup>79</sup> system; the first had power, the second had wealth, and both had status deriving from belonging to the upper castes, with a twist in favor of the urban elites participating more directly in the building of a modern industrialized India. Naturally, this is an oversimplified picture—as the reality was much more complex, with strong links and interconnections between the two, and with some semblance of upward mobility for the lower echelons of society.

It is important to note the basic coincidence between the upper castes and the middle class, which shared common social and educational backgrounds, and the ability to accommodate their mutual interests. These factors contributed to a shared vision of the country, of her identity and future, reflecting the Gandhi-Nehru legacy of a democratic, secular, tolerant India employing industrialization and economic development as a strategy to defeat poverty and forge equality between her citizens.



**Figure 11: a scene from Albaar Alvi's *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghuram*.**

As a matter of fact, the Indian middle class represented a very small part of the country and grew increasingly disconnected with the masses, revealing some schizophrenic traits; the humanist-socialist-liberal background was increasingly at odds with the concern for social status and de facto class/caste affiliation—not to mention the reality of everyday life and the experience of the unimaginable poverty of the lower strata of society. At a later point, I will come back to the schizophrenia between the faith in secularism and the deep-rooted religiosity of the Indian people.<sup>80</sup>

These contradictions were clearly reflected in the golden period of Indian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, when movies were driven by nation-building themes and

peasant worker hero figures, underscoring at the same time the unease and sense of betrayal of the middle class intellectuals, as “independent India . . . was still struggling with poverty, social injustice, the caste system, the exploitation of women.” Therefore, you have the powerful movies of Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Guru Gutt, Abrar Alvi, touching upon these issues, like Roy’s *Zameen Do Bigha*, which tells the story of a dispossessed peasant who becomes a city rickshaw puller and returns defeated to the countryside, where his land has been taken by a city developer, or Albaar Alvi’s classic *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghuram* (Figure 11), which is a sharp critique of the feudal system.<sup>81</sup> The subjects of these movies, and their quality and courage, strike a peculiar contrast with much of the current Bollywood productions, which range from extravagant imitations of Western movies to conservative family stories, praising traditional, conservative, or even reactionary values, somehow soothing the anxiety of the new Indian middle class.

<sup>79</sup> The term 'zamindar' derive from the Persian zamin (or land), and dar which is an inflexion of the verb dashtan, denoting to have, hold or possess. During the Mughal era, the Zamindari system was set up to collect taxes from the peasants (under the responsibility of the Zamindar, who hold rights on the land). The word Zamindar then became synonymous of landlord under the British.

<sup>80</sup>Varma (1998), p. 45.

<sup>81</sup>M. Shedde, *Cineaste*, Summer 2006.

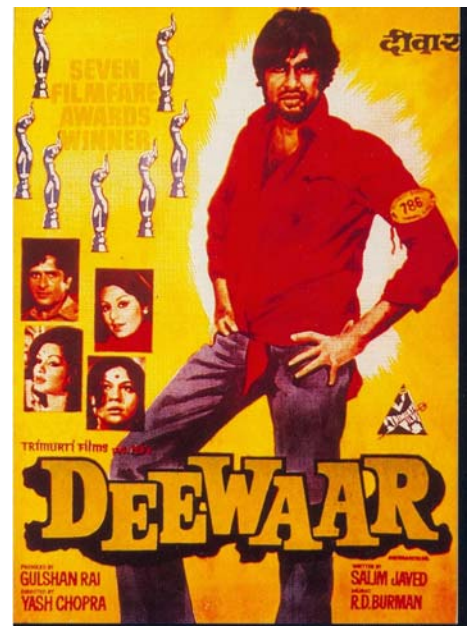


It is indeed ironic that one of the main icons of Indian cinema, film star Amitabh Bachchan, playing the angry young Indian of the 1970s revolting against the system in movies like *Zanjeer* (1973), *Deewaar* (1975), *Sholay* (1975), or *Trishul* (1978), is now perfectly at ease in his stereotyped role of patriarch in the reinvented as modern yet traditional Indian family, for instance, in the 2001 *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. And it is worth mentioning how the same role is now played in real life by film personalities, as the self-appointed representatives—and loud voices—of the new middle class, of their new/old values, and of their way of thinking.

### ***The New Middle Class***

The so-called “green revolution”<sup>82</sup> of the 1960s, plus the migration of Indian workers to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, was one of the first signals of the coming transformation in the composition of the Indian middle class. This process took off in the 1980s, sharply accelerating through 1991.<sup>83</sup>

As a matter of fact, the reforms of the past two decades have yielded a completely different middle class, partly coming from the countryside, often belonging to the twice-born, but with an increasing relevance of the so-called *shudras*, the lower caste of the *Varna* system, which would now represent, according to some estimates, half of the new middle class. It is almost impossible to have reliable numbers about the current consistency and composition of the Indian middle class. If we consider the World Bank poverty line of two dollars per day (79.9 percent of the population), the Indian middle class would number 200+ million people.<sup>84</sup> The data elaborated by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) are instead rather optimistic, based as they are different thresholds of income and on patterns of consumption. NCAER’s upbeat projections for 2007 foresaw an Indian middle class of 91 million households (more or less 450 million people). The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle, and, along this line, in 2001 the Center for Industrial and Economic Research estimated an overall middle class of 350 million people, including its lower strata.<sup>85</sup>



Actually, any oversimplification based on Western standards should be discouraged, as the acquisition of expensive consumer goods, for instance cars, is still a major decision for the average middle class family, especially in the countryside. We must also consider that the differentials between the higher and lower strata of the new middle class are greater than in the past, thus

<sup>82</sup>The reform of agriculture introduced by Indira Gandhi at the end of the 1960s, mainly based on mechanization and on a system of price incentives and subsidies, the “green revolution” increased the competitiveness and profitability of some sectors of Indian agriculture.

<sup>83</sup>Das (2002) pp. 279-85.

<sup>84</sup>These estimates, published in the 2006 World Development Report, refer to a 2000 survey and do not seem to take into account the phenomenal growth of the past five years; furthermore, they cannot really quantify large areas of prosperity in the countryside and in the informal economy.

<sup>85</sup>For further reference, see also, J. Nijman, “Mumbai’s Mysterious Middle Class,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 30.4, December 2006, pp. 753-75.

making the whole notion of middle class highly controversial; a large section of the lower strata is affected by the same kind of job and income insecurity as are the working class and the poor.<sup>86</sup>

There is an extensive body of literature about the differences between the old and the new middle class, in terms of composition, social and educational background, values, and political affiliations. Based on my experience, I must confess that, after dealing with the highly educated, civilized, and formal members of the Nehruvian generation, contacts with the newcomers can be baffling, because of this group's apparent self-confidence, aggressiveness, and reliance on material success as a sign of status and power.

This new middle class is the heart of the thriving Indian private sector, and it has a very strong sense of self-pride in its achievements. It is perhaps even more schizophrenic than the old middle class, but in a different way, as the Gandhi-Nehru austerity legacy and the tension towards the building of a more equitable and just society seems to be a relic of the past. At the same time, the void they left has been filled with a contradictory rediscovery of Hindu traditions and religion, which should in principle be at odds with the current prevailing trends of materialism and consumerism—though one could argue that the public display of religious sentiments and piety, which is very much a part of contemporary India, is in itself an objectification of religion.

Middle-class Indians are also nurturing a strong sense of resentment towards their predecessors and the whole of the public sector, motivated by its alleged inefficiency and corruption, a resentment exemplified by the conventional wisdom of the Indian economic miracle built despite the state.<sup>87</sup>

Undoubtedly, the emergence of the new middle class is a sign of the deep changes in the structure of Indian society, as the restructuring of the Indian economy gradually marginalizes the traditional middle-class basis of state enterprises, benefiting segments of the middle class that make gains in the thriving private sector and in multinational enterprises. And it is clear that the social composition of the new leadership of the Indian economy, albeit still influenced by the upper castes, is much more diverse.

A clear example of what is really happening can be found in the structure and employment policies of Indian companies. In my experience, the pervasive family structure of Indian capitalism and of the vast network of small and medium-sized enterprises is also linked with caste or religious affiliations; this is particularly true for religious minorities like the Parsis and the Jains, but it is also the case for some merchant castes. Three levels can actually be distinguished: ownership and top-management, which mostly respond to family/caste loyalties; high and middle management, for which caste is still an important, albeit not conclusive, factor; and the bulk of clerks and workers, for whom the influence of caste can depend on specific individuals and/or on local situations.

This picture is vastly simplified, as often happens with a country as diverse and complex as India. There are clear signs that the expansion of Indian companies in the world markets and the increasing competitiveness of the Indian market are pushing in favor of choices made on the basis

---

<sup>86</sup>See L. Fernandes, "Restructuring the New Middle Class in Liberalizing India," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XX Nos. 1-2, 2000.

<sup>87</sup>A critique that seems largely unfair and could also be attributed to the need to justify the most controversial aspects of India's economic miracle, for instance, the weight of the informal sector within the Indian economy, which truly requires the building of an extreme neoliberal ideology for which taxes, law, regulations, and the concept of public administration are, at best, a nuisance.

of competence and merit for the higher levels of the hierarchy as well, contributing to the emancipation of some sectors of the lower castes.

### *Towards a New Caste/Class Politics?*

I have dealt extensively with the contrast between the old and new middle class and their own schizophrenic traits, as it is clear that the current contradictions and the unresolved relationship between caste and class will play a decisive role in shaping Indian identity in the future. In this connection, any understanding of the process related to social transformation in India would be incomplete unless we consider three further issues: the so-called process of “sanskritization”; the debate about reservation policies; and the impact of globalization and economic liberalization on caste politics and consciousness.

The process of sanskritization is typical of the lower castes in the north of India, the same castes that are playing an important role in the growth of the economy. As a matter of fact, dominant upper-caste culture had such an influence in northern Indian society that low Hindu castes and tribal or other subordinated groups changed their way of life, customs, rituals, to conform to “high-caste” dictates, for instance by adopting vegetarianism.<sup>88</sup> This can be explained both in religious and cultural terms, but it also seems to be the result of the dominant status of higher castes in northern states like Rajasthan and Bihar, where they represent 24.2 percent and 13.6 percent of the population, respectively.<sup>89</sup>

One of the most striking examples of sanskritization is the case of *Yadav*, cattlers and farmers, representing one of the largest castes in Bihar (11 percent) and Uttar Pradesh (8.7 percent). The *Yadav* adhered in large numbers to the Arya Samaj,<sup>90</sup> reinventing a glorious past through their descendance from dynasties quoted in the Mahabharata and in the Purana.<sup>91</sup>

The same “conformist” aspirations for a higher status were resolved in a completely different way in southern states like Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra and also in relation to the much lower percentages of upper castes<sup>92</sup>; the solution was the so-called ethnicization, that is the building of an egalitarian subculture in opposition to the hierarchical system implicit in sanskritization. On this basis, the aforementioned father of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, invented a Buddhist past for the untouchables, thus linking them with a prestigious culture and explaining their lowest “status” in an Hindu India on historical grounds.

Both sanskritization and ethnicization could be defined as cultural responses to the need for the emancipation of lower castes. To the contrary, reservation policies for education and civil service represented the political and legal response to the same needs. Issues related to reservations and quotas to promote the well-being and status of the lower strata of Indian society have always been very sensitive but, in recent years, the politics related to the concession of Scheduled Castes

---

<sup>88</sup>C. Jaffrelot, “Sanskritization versus Ethnicization in India,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2000), p. 759.

<sup>89</sup>The last data available come from the 1931 British census; the 1941 census data were, for obvious reasons, largely incomplete; the collection of caste data in the framework of census operations ceased with independence.

<sup>90</sup>A Hindu reform movement founded in 1875 in Bombay by Dayananda Sarasvati. See below.

<sup>91</sup>The mythological narratives of sanskritization often link the contemporary lower status to rivalries between upper castes and injustices committed by rulers under the instigation of an opponent caste.

<sup>92</sup>Andhra Pradesh: Brahmins (3 percent), *Kshatriya* (1.2 percent); Maharashtra: Brahmins (3.9 percent), *Kshatriya* (1 percent), *Vaishya* (1.69 percent). Jaffrelot (2000).

(SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), or Other Backward Castes (OBC) status have become a major issue in India, triggering riots and protests.<sup>93</sup>

On the institutional side, as the caste-based census was discontinued after 1931, the Supreme Court “has asked the Central Government to determine who are socially and economically backward,” thus implicitly supporting the plea of those asking for a new caste census.<sup>94</sup>

As a matter of fact, reservations were the other side of British classificatory and ethnographic inquiries that started with the census of 1871; while rigidifying Indian society along the caste system, Raj officers were confronted with its deep injustices. Reservations were first introduced for education at the end of the nineteenth century; they were gradually extended to the civil service, reaching 12.5 percent of job vacancies in 1946 for the untouchables, who were renamed Scheduled Castes in 1935. These policies were translated into the 1950 Constitution (Articles 340-341) and extended to the Scheduled Tribes.<sup>95</sup>

The basic idea behind reservation policies is that of an elite-building process; the “cream” of the SC and ST should become true elites, triggering virtuous dynamics and helping other members of the caste reach emancipation. But the results, until recently, have been mixed at best; according to some research, those seeing such success have become increasingly alienated from their own castes, while the others have consolidated their sense of inferiority. Furthermore “the reservation system did little to provoke social changes . . . for decades, the greater percentage of SC in the national bureaucracy were employed in low-level menial positions.”<sup>96</sup> My attention has also been drawn to the fact that reservation policies can also have perverse unexpected effects; they can act as an incentive for upper castes to pursue their education abroad, thus increasing their competitive edge, as shown by the success of Indian students in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, and by the high percentage of upper castes in the thriving IT and service sectors.<sup>97</sup> To the contrary, the quality of Indian universities and the civil service is declining, both because of the crisis of human sciences studies and lower standards of admission.

The whole subject of reservation policies became even more complicated with the desire of the so-called OBC, more or less the lower-caste *shudras*, representing at about 45 percent of the Indian population to participate in the system, an aspiration first rejected in the 1960s, then gradually achieved through mechanisms implemented by the single states.<sup>98</sup> To make a long story short, after an intricate debate involving both central and local governments and the judicial system, every state is now free to fix its quota for the OBC; this is presenting an increasingly paradoxical

---

<sup>93</sup>A very recent example concerns Rajasthan, where a *jati* counting 5.3 million people is demanding ST status, which would grant them privileged access to education and civil service. On 29 May 2007, protest degenerated to riots against the police, with thirteen people killed and more than 100 wounded.

<sup>94</sup>Bhagat, *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 May 2007.

<sup>95</sup>Just to quote some numbers, SC account for 17 percent of the Indian population, ST for 7 percent (1991 census)

<sup>96</sup>Jaffrelot (2006).

<sup>97</sup>Not to mention the fascinating upper-caste cosmopolitans colonizing world capitals like London and New York as well as the main English-speaking universities of the world.

<sup>98</sup>In 1978, the Indian Parliament established the Mandal Commission, which acknowledged lower-caste aspirations.



state of affairs in local situations, like in Tamil Nadu where four-fifths of the civil service posts are subject to quotas.<sup>99</sup>

As pointed out by Christophe Jaffrelot, the history of OBC reservations is fascinating from the point of view of the evolution, over the past two decades, of caste politics and consciousness in India: “whereas positive discrimination aims at social transformation, in India it made first and foremost a political impact.”<sup>100</sup> From this point of view, it is worth noting that, while quotas for the SC and ST met with little or no opposition, the upper castes reacted violently to the extension of the policy to the OBC; student associations in Indian universities were gradually reshaped along caste lines, with recurring inter-caste clashes. Just after the publication of the Mandal Commission conclusions in 1980, 63 upper-caste students immolated themselves as an ultimate protest against the results of the report and the proposed policy—which they considered highly detrimental to their interests as it was prejudging any possibility of employment in the public sector.<sup>101</sup>

In the current rhetoric about Indian economic development and the thriving middle class, the subject of the working class and of the poor—still representing probably more than 60-70 percent of the Indian population—is remarkably absent; this absence is somehow in continuity with the history of the colonial and post-colonial states, reposing the dialectics between the middle class and their elites, and the subordinates. Historically, Indian social and economic fragmentation has never allowed for the coalescing of the subordinates, nor has it been amenable to any substantial contribution on their part to the construction of Indian identity. This is probably one of the key issues for the future of India, considering not only the respective consistency of the middle class and of the lower classes, but also the growing disillusionment of the Indian middle class towards politics—to the contrary, voting patterns and the high percentages of participation in the elections in the poorest constituencies confirm how the “subordinates” stubbornly and passionately look, for better or worse, at politics (and democratic processes) as the only means to improve their lot.

I made already reference to the recent elections in Uttar Pradesh, where the BSP, historically representing the untouchables, will rule with a comfortable majority the largest Indian state, a state that has traditionally been the constituency of the Nehru family and elects 80 out of the 545 members of the Indian Parliament.

*Dalits* in Uttar Pradesh have shown a high degree of cohesion and political consciousness. But they have also shown a surprising political maturity, even more surprising considering that their alliance strategies until recently were mainly conceived in negative terms, to weaken their opponents, especially those representing the higher and lower castes. On the contrary, the BSP managed to rally under its lead the traditional *Dalit* and Muslim constituencies, but also a high number of upper-caste voters, also getting some support from the lower castes.

It is true that the coalition in power reflects the same balance that allowed the Congress Party to rule the state uncontested until the 1970s, but it is also true that now the *Dalits* are in charge. The composition of the coalition along class lines and beyond caste and religious affiliations seems to be linked to the consequences of economic reforms and privatization policies, which brought together those who have been the hardest hit by the reforms: urban and landless

---

<sup>99</sup>At the same time, the size and proportion of the OBC are still extrapolated from the 1931 census, as any recent attempt by the central government to determine which groups should be included (or excluded) in this category has been highly controversial.

<sup>100</sup>Jaffrelot (2006).

<sup>101</sup>Jaffrelot (2006).

peasant laborers (mainly *Dalits* and Muslims), but also impoverished upper- and lower-caste clerks and small landlords.<sup>102</sup>

As I have already noted, the intertwining of caste and class politics represents a major challenge for the future of India. Conventional wisdom affirms that the Indian working class has always been divided, segmented, and hierarchical in terms of caste, race, gender, nationality, and religion. Only the future will help us understand if what seems to be the triumph of caste politics—and of its collateral world of feudal rulers (bandits) turning politicians<sup>103</sup>—could instead mark the beginning of a new brand of class politics in India.



*Figure 12: Gandhiji at Dandi, Ramendranath Chakraborty (1902-55), Osian's*

---

<sup>102</sup>Actually, the same process occurred in the recent past when the “rich Uttar Pradesh peasantry following economic liberalization took to mechanization shifting to cultivation of sugar cane and other cash crops,” consolidating *Dalit* and Muslim political consciousness and the role of the BSP as the representative of their interests. “Mayawati’s Revolution,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 19 May 2007. From a more general perspective, the linkage between economic reforms and the consolidation of political consciousness irrespective of caste barriers among the “losers of the games” can also be interpreted as a sign of a further polarization of Indian society.

<sup>103</sup>According to the *Uttar Pradesh Election Watch*, out of 5,940 candidates for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly, 882 have criminal records for offenses ranging from extortion to massacres.





*Figure 13: Badri Nath Arya, Gandhiji Armony of Religions, Osian's*



#### IV. India's Struggling Identity

##### *Hinduism: Religion as Orthopraxis*



Auroville is a utopian city built in Tamil Nadu—the southern state on the eastern coast of India—according to the visions and dreams<sup>1</sup> of Shri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), a fervent Bengali nationalist and one of the leaders of the Swadeshi movement (1905-1908). Aurobindo, a mystic, socialist, and philosopher who became a guru in the second half of his life, remains one of the most complex characters of Indian independence; his trajectory somehow reflects the Hindu doctrines concerning different stages of life and anticipated the itinerary of India self-consciousness.

I visited Auroville in 2002 and was simply amazed by the constant flow of Indians visiting the Matrimandir, a strange, sort of geodesic, bubble-shaped, gilded tile-covered temple, with an abstract monochromatic white sancta sanctorum that was designed by an Italian architect. Ghose philosophy and spirituality has roots in Indian religious tradition, but it is almost impossible to connect the absolute austerity of Auroville's inner chamber to any Indian temple. Yet the numbers of Indian visitors are simply amazing: hundreds of thousands, mostly Indians, visit the Matrimandir every year.

Elsewhere, in the temple city of Madurai dedicated to the deity Meenakshi, one can witness a peculiar form of devotion: worshippers gather at the foot of a Shiva statue and throw small balls of butter at it. The same ironic sense of the sacred can be found in many Indian temples and rituals (Hindu, but also Muslim, Jain, Christian, and Parsi), linking everyday lives and common sense to the realms of spirituality and religiosity. For instance, on the outskirts of Jaipur, a temple dedicated to Hanuman, the monkey god of the Ramayana, contains a series of three pools: the higher and smaller is dedicated to monkeys, the medium to male worshippers, while the water “blessed by monkeys and men” flows into the lowest, but bigger, pool reserved for women.

Finally, even on the most modern and busy streets of Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore, one commonly sees trees, holes in walls, or simple bushes transformed into shrines dedicated to Hindu gods or to Muslim or Christian saints. This form of worship may be linked to the immigrant communities living in the streets, and it has both religious and practical purposes: devotional display and the quest for protection of the divinity are enmeshed with the claiming of rights to that part of the street or of the sidewalk, making it more difficult for local residents and the authorities to expel the temporary migrants.

---

<sup>1</sup>His dreams and visions were interpreted by his companion, Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), who was simply called “la mère.”

The variety of Indian religious traditions<sup>2</sup> and the forms taken by the Indian sense of the religious have often been misunderstood as superstitious and barbaric, not only by Western missionaries and civil servants,<sup>3</sup> but also by a substantial section of Indian elites, engaged in a constant struggle between their sense of modernity—as shaped according to Western models—and their pride in the greatness of Indian civilization and spiritual and religious traditions.

Any attempt to define the Indian religious mosaic and its astounding variety goes well beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>4</sup> I will, however, draw attention to some basic elements of Hinduism, as the transformations of this continuously evolving religious tradition are crucial for understanding the impact of globalization on Indian society and self-consciousness as a nation.

Hinduism is not a religion of one book.<sup>5</sup> There is a loose line evolving from the Veda and the Upanishad, through the great epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Purana, the Vedanta tradition, and the devotional practices and teachings of religious masters and social reformers. But Hinduism as a religion is considered as essentially proteiform: a sort of tree with thousands of branches and roots in the Veda and the Brahminic tradition, Bhakti devotional practices, and religious masters (not only Brahmins), a tree continuously evolving and adapting itself to times and circumstances, assimilating gods and goddesses from local traditions and invaders, Hinduizing even Buddha as one of the incarnations of Vishnu.<sup>6</sup> This is actually the most striking feature of Hinduism: it is not a coherent system, and the same concept of religion and the similarities and differences with other traditions are constantly debated and often ridiculed with an ironic and disillusioned attitude towards the concept of orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup>

E.A. Gait, the British official directing the Imperial Census in 1911, listed a series of criteria to establish whether or not a man could be considered Hindu. The responses he received from the different provinces were far from satisfactory: “a quarter of the persons classed as Hindus deny the supremacy of the Brahmins and the authority of the Vedas, more than half do not receive the

---

<sup>2</sup>I will use mainly the formula religious tradition, as a “condensed expression for social-cultural-religious tradition” according to the reading of T.N. Madan in *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>The term Hinduism was probably invented in the first decades of the nineteenth century by Christian missionaries baffled by what they considered superstitious “beliefs and sordid practices.” *Ibidem*, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>India is home to almost all religions in the world. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world; Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism were founded in India. It is also one of the few countries where Zoroastrianism is still practiced. Indian Muslims alone would make it the third largest Muslim nation in the world, and the Christian presence in India most likely dates to the second century.

<sup>5</sup>According to most historians, there never was a predominant need for uniformity or sanctioning of religion through the rationalization, reinterpretation or rewriting of texts, as it happened with the Hebrew and Christian Bible of the “Septuaginta” and the “Vulgata” or the Quran of Zayd Ibn Thabit under the first and third Caliphs. Furthermore, any religious text in India has been written and re-written in hundreds of different versions in different ages, regions, and languages.

<sup>6</sup>For instance, according to various texts, Vishnu was reincarnated in Buddha and came to the earth to fail humans and divert them from true religion. Humans had become too pious and were threatening to overpopulate heaven, thus breaking the balance between heaven and earth.

<sup>7</sup>Quoting *Hindu Dharma* by Guru Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati Swami (1894-1994): “All religions have one common ideal: worship of the Lord, and all of them proclaim there is but one God. This one God accepts your devotion, irrespective of the manner of your worship, whether it is according to this or that religion. The different religions have taken shape according to the customs peculiar to the countries in which they originated and according to the different attitudes of the devotees concerned.” Along these lines, with a vein of sarcasm against Hindu nationalists, Nehru defined Hinduism as vague and amorphous, impossible to define and meaning everything to everybody. J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, John Day, 1946, p. 46.



mantras from a recognized Hindu guru, a quarter do not worship the great Hindu gods and are not served by good Brahmin priests, a third are denied access to temples, a quarter cause pollution by touch, a seventh always bury their dead, while half do not regard cremation as obligatory, and two-fifths eat beef.”<sup>8</sup>

Hinduism in its most inclusive form truly appears as a mosaic of faith, devotional practices, and philosophical and ethical systems much closer to the concept of orthopraxis (way of life) than to the Western concept of religion.<sup>9</sup> The connection of everyday life and praxis is the main strength of this religious tradition and makes it essentially diverse, as diverse as are the thousands of communities of India, as well as the nation’s geographic and social landscape. As with other religious traditions during the colonial period, the encounter of this diversity with “monolithic” Christianity produced a short-circuit; diversity and plurality of rituals and beliefs became a symbol of inferiority, especially for Indian elites who were obliged to rediscover only those parts of their traditions that were more attuned with rival religions, thus strengthening monistic (and Brahminic) strains of Hinduism.

From this perspective, we can try to relate historical Hinduism with contemporary Hindu nationalism and its fundamentalist version. As with the caste system,<sup>10</sup> there are those who define these strains as constructs of British Orientalism manipulated by Brahmins.<sup>11</sup> Quoting the great Indian historian, Romila Thapar: “The new Hinduism which is being currently propagated by the Sanghs, Parishads, and Samajs is an attempt to restructure the indigenous religions as a monolithic uniform religion . . . Its form is not only in many ways alien to the earlier culture of India but equally disturbing is the uniformity which it seeks to impose on the variety of Hindu religions.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, “the need for postulating a Hindu community became a requirement for political mobilization in the nineteenth century, when representation by religious communities became a key to power and where representation gave access to economic resources.”<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, it is essential to understand the itinerary of these strains, as they are gradually becoming a part of Indian “common sense” in Gramscian terms, coincidental with the growth of the middle class and the development of an unprecedented mass culture as one of the most visible effects of globalization in India. And it seems to me that these developments cannot be considered just a “figment of Orientalist imagination,”<sup>14</sup> nor are they any longer artificial as they now represent a true and relevant part of Hinduism and of Indian politics and social fabric.

At the risk of falling into an Orientalist argument, there is a specific feature of the Hindu religious ethos: the sanctification of worldliness, using the formula of Nirad Chaudhuri, the absence of the distinction between private and public piety—a distinction that is essential to the Western

---

<sup>8</sup>S. Muralidharan, “Patriotism without People: Milestones in the Evolution of Hindu Nationalist Ideology,” *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, Nos. 5/6 (May-June 1994), pp. 3-38.

<sup>9</sup>See among others, M. Pianelli, in *Storia delle religioni*, Vol. 4 “Religioni dell’India e dell’Estremo Oriente,” edited by G. Filoramo, Vol. 4, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Which is also an integral part of the Hindu religious tradition, e.g., of one of the many Brahminic currents of Hinduism.

<sup>11</sup>A. Bonner, *Democracy in India: A Hollow Shell*, The American University Press, Washington, 1994, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup>R. Thapar, “Syndicated Moksha,” Seminar at the J. Nehru University, Delhi, 1987, pp. 14-22.

<sup>13</sup>R. Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 23, 2 1989, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup>Madan (1997) p. 179.

version of secularism, but is simply blasphemous in a country in which mountains, hills, rocks, or even a simple tree in the busiest street of Mumbai can embody the divine.<sup>15</sup>

This diversity makes religion an essential instrument for mass politics in India. As we will see shortly, the ability to use public piety and religious symbolism has been a constant feature of Indian politics since even before the times of Gandhi with the figures of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. This ability has become a constant feature of postsecular Indian politics, with Hindu nationalists making instrumental use of ideas and concepts, as for instance, the “Ram Raj,”<sup>16</sup> which was an important part of the Mahatma’s political vocabulary and of his privileged relationship with the Indian masses.

### ***Religious Identity and National Identity: Hindu Revivalism***

The relationship between religious traditions and national identity has been, and remains, the main battlefield for the contending visions of Indian modernity. This is a most striking paradox of a country in which religion is enmeshed in daily life, and the public display of piety plays such an important part within the political discourse, a country, however, that found her nationalist leadership in the upper-caste, British educated, (mostly) secular elite.<sup>17</sup> Given the scope of this paper, it is pointless to look back in the past for traces of contentious religious identities or to rewrite a history of interreligious tensions in India, especially between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>18</sup> The reconstruction of the Muslim presence in India is seen as either a nightmare of invasions, pillages, destruction of temples, and persecution of Hindus, or a dream of enlightened kings and emperors pursuing dialogue and interreligious peace. Both visions contains some elements of truth, but they are substantially erroneous because of their utilization of contemporary categories to appreciate the past, their representation of a simplified history built on the extremes, and, above all, because of their anti-historical lack of understanding of the fragmentation of earlier Indian history—which makes certain categories, such as “Hindus” and “Muslims,” simply inapplicable.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, considerable evidence that religious identities were much less defined and inter-religious tensions were actually less relevant in ancient India and during the Mughal period (1526-1857). From this point of view, it is interesting to notice the parallel trajectory of the “divide et impera” policy of the Raj—leaning at first toward the Hindus, then toward the Muslims—and of British narratives related to Hindu-Muslim riots,<sup>20</sup> as well as the depiction of Muslim rule as oppressive and intolerant of other religions.

---

<sup>15</sup>“To speak about religion in India without querying the notion of religion as a discrete element of everyday life is to yield to the temptation of words.” Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup>Literally the “rule of Ram,” the golden age of Hinduism when Ram, the incarnation of Vishnu and the hero of India’s most popular epic, *The Ramayana*, was king.

<sup>17</sup>An elite who considered religion essentially as a private affair, which was not supposed to play any role in politics.

<sup>18</sup>Though it is worth remembering how Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism developed as religious traditions with recurring tensions against Hinduism.

<sup>19</sup>Kaviraj, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup>See, for instance, the narratives about Hindu-Muslim riots in the nineteenth century, starting from the 1809 “grave Benares riots” through the 1886 Delhi great riots, to the Shahabad and Katanpur village “disturbances in 1917-18, where the economic and social causes are often downplayed to build a narrative of Hindu-Muslim violence as instinctive and helpless, thus gradually forging the idea of inherent Hindu-Muslim hostility as expressed by “communalism” (adding naturally to the moral justification of British rule in South Asia. See G. Pandey, *The Colonial*

The linkage between Hindu religious identity and nationalism has been a major underlying theme during the Indian struggle for independence, even within the ranks of the Congress Party (founded in 1885). Since the start of the nineteenth century, the uneasy relationship between Indian religious traditions, in particular Hinduism, and the politics of national/civilizational identity has been directly linked to the process of adaptation and/or reaction to pervasive Western influence—which took both the form of aggressive Christian missionary activities, and of versions of modernity and progress as propagated by the British administration and intelligentsia.

Historians generally agree on the coincidence between the 1813 lifting of the British ban against proselytizing by Christian missionaries and the origin of Indian revivalist movements. Also under British influence and encouragement, the upper castes (especially in Bengal) rediscovered Hinduism as a religion through the lens of the West, putting into question some of its rituals and practices as well as some of its social institutions, such as the caste system, child marriage, and *sati* (the immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres). This process led to the foundation of several movements such as Brahma Samaj (1828), Dharma Sabha (1830), and Arya Samaj (1875), by social reformers like Ram Mohan Roy<sup>21</sup> (1772-1833), Redhakant Deb (1784-1867), Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884), and Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883).

In past decades, the interest of historians has concentrated on tracing fundamentalist tendencies in these movements, on their influence on the origin of Hindu nationalism, and on the process leading to the foundation of movements like the Hindu Mahasabha (1908/1920) and RSS (1925). T.N. Madan provides a more complex picture of this process, showing the emergence of several critical elements, as for instance the emphasis on scriptural authority and on the research for a “purified” version of the Hindu tradition, but excluding any possible categorization of these movements as essentially fundamentalist.<sup>22</sup>

The Arya Samaj, founded in Bombay in 1875 by Dayananda Sarasvati, is often considered the root of Hindu nationalism. Finding support among the upper castes (mainly *Vayshya* and Brahmins), its religious program was based on the reconstruction of the purity of Hinduism and on the rejection of bodily characteristics of the gods and goddesses and of the avatars.<sup>23</sup> The ideology of the Arya Samaj, though not fundamentalist per se, was articulated along the idea of the purification of Hinduism from corrupted beliefs and the return of Indian society to a state of purity, also through social reform and mobilization.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting how Gandhi, notwithstanding his

---

*Construction of “Communalism”: British Writings on Banaras in the Nineteenth Century, Subaltern Studies, Vol. VI, Oxford University Press, 1989.*

<sup>21</sup>Ram Mohan Roy—the founder of Brahma Sabha, whose enormous influence in shaping Indian modernity is widely acknowledged—wanted to purify Hinduism from what he considered “repugnant social practices”<sup>21</sup>; he considered the Vedas and the Upanishads as the source of Hinduism. He was, however, impressed by the Christian Gospel and by Enlightenment ideals and he was very well connected with European nationalist movements. K.C. Sen went even further, rejecting both the Vedas and the Upanishads as infallible scriptures and striving to “take the Brahma movement closer to Christianity” before falling under the influence of the Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna and his religious pluralism, according to which “all the available paths of spiritual realization within the Hindu world” are equally true.

<sup>22</sup>Madan (1997) p. 36.

<sup>23</sup>In fact, Dayananda opted for a concept of revelation as found in the Abrahamic tradition. For him, Vedic revelation was the only true source of Hinduism.

<sup>24</sup>After the mysterious death of Dayananda (allegedly poisoned), the movement underwent several schisms, with a militant wing opposing a moderate one, which acquired a significant role in the politics of nationalism at the end of the First World War with the new Gandhian course of the Congress Party. Some of the militants were instead among the members and founders of the Hindu Mahasabha and of the RSS.

admiration for Dayananda, was somehow startled by a part of his work, especially by his “narrow vision of Hinduism and his misrepresentation of other religions.”<sup>25</sup>

Since the beginning, these movements and their leaders were divided between different ideas of Indian modernity and its relationship with social and religious tradition; and it is clear that Christianity and Western models of development and progress were, for better or worse, the predominant benchmarks by which everything had to be measured.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, according to the prevailing analysis, these movements were not the expression of dominant social forces in Indian colonial society in a Gramscian sense; they shared a substantial ambiguity and a common attitude towards compromise and concessions to scriptural authority and colonial power. Until the end of the nineteenth century, this attitude, along with the “unconcealed faith in the basic goodness of the colonial order,” was the prevailing mark of the Indian intelligentsia.<sup>27</sup>

From this perspective, it is interesting to note that the great Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 (Figure 18) found very little support from these movements or from the Indian intelligentsia and middle class. The geographical location of the “Mutiny,” its different aristocratic, agrarian, and religious components, and the strong grip of the British in Bengal (which was the cradle of revivalism), ensured that the emerging elites were not “particularly enamoured of what they regarded as a movement of feudal oligarchs.”<sup>28</sup> Though named afterwards as the “First Indian War of Independence,” the Mutiny represented at the time a sort of tragic incident, thanks also to the ability of the colonial Government and its civil servants and intellectuals to highlight the most gruesome details of the rebellion.<sup>29</sup>

As a matter of fact, 1857 entered in the nationalist narrative only decades later, representing a posteriori a watershed in Indian intellectuals’ imagination, allowing them to use history not only in cultural and revivalist, and basically defensive, terms, but also making possible references to a glorious past of valor and courage, and adding to “Indian literati” ideas about nationhood<sup>30</sup> and the possible paths to independence.

### ***The Making of Indian National identity as a Hegemonic Project***

In what is perhaps the most brilliant and lucid contribution to the history of nationalist thought,<sup>31</sup> Partha Chatterjee focuses on three topic moments in the building of modern India: early nationalism, as exemplified by the Bengali middle class of the second half of the nineteenth century

---

<sup>25</sup>It is also worth remembering the social content of the Arya Samaj, which fought against polygamy, idolatry, untouchability, and the caste system. The course leading from this movement to the future Hindu nationalists of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha is extremely complex both from the ideological and the organizational point of view. It is worth mentioning, however, as an important Arya contribution to the practice of *sudhi*, consisting of mass reconversion to Hinduism of Christians and especially Muslims, which carried a strong symbolic meaning in terms of the definition of Hindu self against the “other.” See also Madan (1997) p. 216.

<sup>26</sup>As exemplified by their stands on the caste system, or by the quarrel between Roy and Deb about the abolition of *sati*.

<sup>27</sup>Chatterjee (2004).

<sup>28</sup>S. Bose and A. Jalal (2004) p. 73.

<sup>29</sup>In the words of Charles Ball’s *History of the Indian Mutiny*, there were “acts of atrocity that compel manhood to blush for the species to which it belongs, and that have indelibly stained the annals of India and its people with crimes that disgrace the name of humanity.”

<sup>30</sup>S. Gupta, *Economic and Political Weekly* 12 May 2007.

<sup>31</sup>Chatterjee (2004).

and by the works and thought of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94); the mature nationalism of the first half of the twentieth century, monopolized by the figure of Gandhi; and the building of the independent Indian state since 1947, mainly a creation of Nehru.

In Chatterjee's analysis, the “moment of departure” is characterized by the temporary settlement of the divide between the East and the West, through the acknowledgement of the superiority of the latter, in the material realms of science, technology, and progress. In a truly Orientalist mode of thinking, the East (Indian traditions) is somehow vindicated with the affirmation of the superiority of Eastern spirituality. Chattopadhyay, a novelist, satirist, and “easily the most influential man of letters of Calcutta in his days” is considered the symbol of this period; he shared most of the Orientalist typologies about the essentials of Indian character and its basic differences with the Europeans, but he rejected any essentialism, stressing the need to change India’s backward culture in the material realm.

He also combined the stirring of nationalist thought with religious sentiments and symbolism, emphasizing the superiority of Indian traditions. His nationalism led him to echo revivalist ideas, claiming that “a purified and regenerated Hindu ideal is far superior as a rational philosophy of life than anything that Western religion or philosophy has to offer.”<sup>32</sup>

The regeneration of national culture takes for Chattopadhyay a religious significance as only the practice of a new national religion would “lead to the establishment of the new national character,” which should necessarily involve the country as a whole. And the same concept of a new “national religion” based on a reformed Hinduism as a complete system of culture anticipates Gandhi's immense work in bridging the gap between the nationalist elites and the Hindu masses through a complex cultural operation aimed at the building of a new national common sense. As a matter of fact, his use of (Hindu) religious tradition as a base to build a new national culture did not only anticipate some of the elements of Gandhism, but also some of the main themes of Hindu nationalism, as exemplified by his novel *Anandamath*, which depicts a proto-national religious movement of the eighteenth century strongly biased against the Muslims (Figure 14). The controversy ravaging the independence movement in the 1930s, as seen in the song *Vande Mataram*<sup>33</sup>—taken from a hymn in the novel—clearly shows the inner contradictions of the building of a mass national symbolism in a country like India.<sup>34</sup>

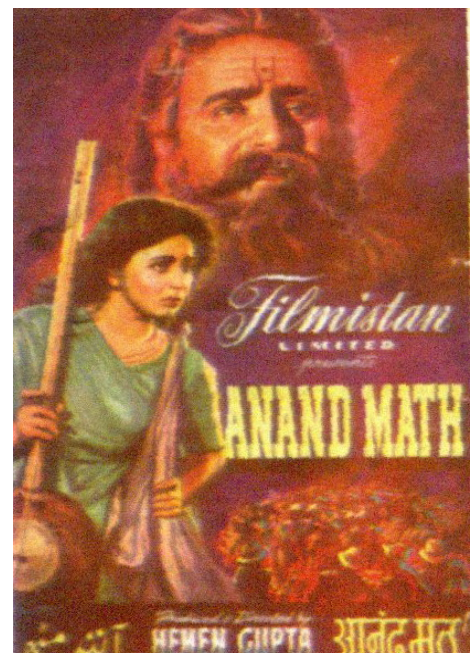


Figure 14: Hemen Gupta's *Anand Math* (1952) Movie Poster, Osian's

<sup>32</sup>Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>33</sup>The song was supposed to become independent India's national anthem, notwithstanding its strong Hindu exclusivism and the anti-Muslim context of the novel *Ananda Math*. The text of the song—whose music score was written by R. Tagore himself—is a hymn to Mother Heart, identified with several Hindu goddesses (Durga, Lakshmi, etc.) In 1937, the Tagore expressed to Netaji Bose his concern about the controversy, rejecting the song as it could represent a symbol of disunity among Indian communities.

<sup>34</sup>Along the same lines, it is also worth remembering the importance of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the influential leader of the Congress Party at the end of the nineteenth century. He shaped his nationalist rhetoric making extensive use of history and religious symbolism, for instance, through the exaltation of the figure of Shivaji—the Maratha ruler



The moment of maneuver is monopolized by the figure of Gandhi and his rejection of the very notion of modernity and progress, which was “in fact a fundamental critique of bourgeois society.”<sup>35</sup> Gandhi’s use of anti-modernist arguments<sup>36</sup> and of religious symbolism—as well his dialectics on these topics with Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Rabindranath Tagore—was instrumental in the building of a more mature Indian nationalist. The role of Gandhi was of paramount importance for mediating between secular British educated intellectuals (like Nehru) and the Indian (Hindu?) masses, or in Gramscian terms, for the “political appropriation of the subaltern classes by a bourgeoisie aspiring for hegemony in the new Indian State.” Gandhism provided for the first time in Indian politics the ideological basis for including the whole people within the political nation.<sup>37</sup>

This was also achieved through a peculiar combination of religious symbolism, pre-industrial economics, and a radical critique of the mantras of progress such as industrialization and mechanization. For Gandhi, the utopian/religious message of the golden age of Ram Raj<sup>38</sup> was deeply entwined with his vision about the essential structure of Indian rural society as fragmented in hundreds of thousands of village-communities.<sup>39</sup>

Gandhi had a very personal view of Indian identity, based on the Hindu religion and its alleged inclusive nature, as well as on Christian and Islam morality, devotional religion (Bhakti), and elements of the rural culture.<sup>40</sup> It must also be noted that his views about Hinduism and its relationship with different religions evolved gradually and became more and more complex, following the itinerary of the struggle for independence and the increasing Hindu-Muslim hostility. His Hinduism became less dogmatic and ritualistic with an even stronger reference to the final authority of moral conscience and rational thought<sup>41</sup>; his thought was truly, in the words of S. Khilnani, “a strenuous dismantling and reassembling of religious traditions,” which produced an original “moral language profoundly respectful of existing religious faiths.”<sup>42</sup>

---

of the sixteenth century, who fought fiercely against the Mughal empire—and through the establishment of the Ganapati festival in Bombay, celebrating Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Shiva.

<sup>35</sup>As articulated in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909. Chatterjee 2004, p. 90.

<sup>36</sup>Which is, in fact, together with nonviolence, a major part of his thought and fully justifies his popularity among the antiglobal movements.

<sup>37</sup>Chatterjee (2004) p. 110.

<sup>38</sup>The mythical golden age of Hinduism, when the rule of man and God were symbolized by the figure of Ram: the incarnation of the god Vishnu, King of Ayodhya and the hero of India’s most popular epic, *Ramayana*. In this age, “the ruler by his moral quality and habitual adherence to truth always expresses the collective will.” From the economic point of view Ram Raj meant the appeal to an economic organization of production along the *varna* (caste) scheme of specialization based on reciprocity and exchange between the social groups, thus minimizing competition and differences of status. Chatterjee (2004) p. 92.

<sup>39</sup>And it is clear that, for these communities and, in general, for Indian peasants, Gandhi anti-modernist critique was much more reassuring than incomprehensible urban-biased elitist discourses about economic planning and industrialization.

<sup>40</sup>According to S. Bose, since his espousal of the cause of the Khilafat Movement (a political campaign launched mainly by Muslims in South Asia to influence the British Government and to protect the Ottoman Empire during the aftermath of World War I), Gandhi seemed to have devised “the perfect formula for . . . forging Hindu-Muslim unity based on a respectful attitude towards the fact of religiousity informed cultural difference.” Bose (1998).

<sup>41</sup>A lot has been said and written about Gandhi’s contradictory stands in favor of caste/community boundaries—as he notoriously refused to dine even with his closest Muslim friends; but it must also be remembered that, in the last years of his life, he changed his position radically, for instance, attending only inter-community and inter-caste marriages. Madan 1997, pp. 227-28.

<sup>42</sup>S. Khilnani, “Nehru’s Faith,” *The New Republic*, 24 May 2004.

T.N. Madan rejects the idea of a possible contribution of Gandhi's religiosity to Hindu nationalism. He admits though—echoing Nehru—that his religious symbolism was somehow contaminated by fundamentalist elements; and he adds that Gandhi's continual stress on the religious and spiritual side of the national movement "did bestow upon it a revivalistic character among the masses."<sup>43</sup> But we can also trace the maturation of Indian secularism through the thought and experience of Gandhi. On one hand, he was convinced that religion governs the tiniest activity and that politics are inseparable from religion, as religious principles and beliefs are an essential part of the moral order governing human life and the activity of the state; on the other, as we have seen, his religious pluralism evolved radically during the course of his life, laying the foundation of the peculiar version of secularism espoused by the Indian Constitution.

Finally, the moment of arrival is dominated by Nehru, who succeeded in hegemonizing the nationalist discourse as one of order and power and to put it at the service of the building of the new nation on the pillars of secularism, development, and progress, through science and economic planning. Post-independence secularism is truly a creature of the pragmatism and political skills of Nehru, who started from the massacres of the 1947 "partition" to build a non-communal vision of India; this vision focused on civilizational unity and common history, and also on the withdrawal, at least in his wishes, of religion to the private domain.

He repeatedly admitted his unease towards the role played by religion in Indian society,<sup>44</sup> although he realized, under Gandhi's influence, that there was "something else in it."<sup>45</sup> As noted by Sunil Khilnani, Nehru's uneasiness in dealing with such an important aspect of his people's life was somehow mediated by his faith in the "workings of the mind" and his vision of moral life as a constant pursuit of an elusive idea to be tested through the continuous exercise of reason (which he did not consider as eternal and fixed, but as "many-sidedness").<sup>46</sup> This allows us to understand his substantial pragmatism and tormented practice of governance, and also his outstanding ability to cope with some of the major challenges of the new state.<sup>47</sup>

The awareness of the basic difference between his ideas and those of his people, especially regarding attitudes towards religion, is also a part of his "ambiguous" admiration of Gandhi and his magic in dealing with the masses. He deeply disliked Gandhi's religious rhetoric and saw clearly the dangers behind it, but he knew that Gandhi had a special relationship with the masses, as "he could use words that were understood by them."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>I have already noted how some of Gandhi's religious symbolism is now a part of Hindu nationalist rhetoric. Though with Ahish Nandi, it must be remembered that Gandhi can be considered the real father of Indian secularism, and that it was the Gandhi—not Nehru—who was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist and former member of the RSS.

<sup>44</sup>Nehru was personally a staunch secularist, both because of his Fabian socialist background and his experiences with the Indian masses, and he was convinced that religion was an obstacle to progress and development, sanctioning "dogma and bigotry, superstitions and exploitation, and the preservation of vested interests." As he said, "organized religion" filled him "with horror." But it is also worth remembering that he never implemented the kind of severe secularist policies that characterized some of the European countries he admired.

<sup>45</sup>Nehru's personal attitude towards religion, however, did not allow him to separate the excesses of partition and the Hindu-Muslim divide from a more comprehensive and nonideological understanding of his own people, as exemplified in his famous interview with André Malraux to whom he confessed that one of his main regrets was the failure to transform India into a secular country.

<sup>46</sup>Khilnani (2004).

<sup>47</sup>And in this framework, it is worth remembering that the relationship between the new state and the strong linguistic and regional identities also dealt with pragmatism and flexibility, without major scars on the national fabric.

<sup>48</sup>At the same time, Nehru was quite cynical about the impact of Gandhism in terms of practical governance.

As I have noted, our Orientalist background forces us to consider the Indian ethos as inherently religious and spiritual, but it is difficult to deny Indian diversity from this point of view—a diversity in which the pervasive character of religion in India, the attachment to visual symbols of religiosity, the sacralization of geography and space, and the public display of piety are of paramount importance. From this point of view, T.N. Madan has shown how the basic principles of Western secularism<sup>49</sup> are topsy-turvy in Indian religious traditions; the relationship with politics is hierarchical, sanctioning, in true Gandhian language, the supremacy of religion as pervading everyday life and informing the moral order.

The Indian vision of the secular state in terms of noninterference of the state and equal respect for all religions (or religious pluralism) is a compromise drawing both from this reality and Gandhi's understanding of it, and Nehru's Western secularism mediated by his pragmatism and intellectual honesty—which allowed him to recognize, albeit with some regrets that his country and his people were different from what he would have liked them to be.

The Indian Constitution of 1950 reflects these tensions (and many others) in its Articles 25 to 30, in its provisions dedicated to the uniform civil code (Article 44), and in the ban on the slaughter “of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle” (Article 48).<sup>50</sup> After more than half a century, the debate still rages about the contending interpretations of those articles, which are among the many symbols of the inherent contradictions of Indian secularism. But to be fair to India, to her founding fathers, and to her Constitution, we must admit that the resurgence of religious sentiment over the past three decades in virtually every country of the world<sup>51</sup> has questioned many of the responses given to the basic dilemmas posed by the public place of religion and by the relationship between the moral and the political order.

### *Alternative Visions of India*

In the narratives about national identity, there are often voices left at the margins: patriots, intellectuals, and artists, for instance, whose contributions to the construction of national identity are extremely influential, though they do not really fit into mainstream narratives. India has many of these voices, but two of them stand out, as their thought and their personae truly became a fundamental part of Indian national imagery, revealing



*Figure 15: Gandhi & S.C. Bose at Hajipur Conference, 1938. Somnath Khosa (1912-83) Osian's.*

---

<sup>49</sup>The Western notion of secularism is based on the total separation of politics and religion and the confinement of the latter to the private domain.

<sup>50</sup>Neither of these articles has never been implemented as they are considered sort of guidelines. Both provisions are considered potentially harmful for the interests of the Muslims and of other communities.

<sup>51</sup>If we consider, for instance, the controversial notion of secularism and religious pluralism implemented in countries like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom (not to mention Italian and German Catholic/Christian politics), it must be recognized that Western secularism is now truly a figment of the modern imagination.

different paths and alternative ideas of India.

The first of these figures is undoubtedly Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, with his vision of independent India as a federal republic where “equal opportunities should be thrown open to all irrespective of caste creed.” In his Haripura Presidential address in February 1938,<sup>52</sup> he stressed the federative elements of his vision of independent India, giving a new content to the policy of noninterference in matters of conscience, religion, and culture, as well as cultural autonomy for the different linguistic areas, building an imaginative synthesis between the priority to build a unified India and the need to guarantee local and cultural autonomy. And it is worth remembering how at the time, Bose’s “federativism” represented a truly original response to the challenges posed by Indian diversity and the increasing communalization of Indian politics.

These elements, coupled with his stand for a more radical and socially advanced program of reforms were among the main reasons for the success of his recruiting effort for the Azad Hind Fauj, the Indian National Army (INA). In 1943, with the support of the Japanese, Bose managed to unite the 40,000-45,000 Indian soldiers of the British Army who had surrendered in Singapore and the poor laborers and petty traders of the Indian colonial diaspora in Burma and in Southeast Asia. It is worth noting that, in a time of great divisions within the same nationalist leadership, the INA was characterized by “great harmony and unity among various religious and linguistic communities.”<sup>53</sup> In the words of one civilian who volunteered in the INA, all differences of languages, communities, caste, and gender were given a new meaning. “No one had asked us to cease to be a Tamilian or Dogra, Punjabi Muslim or Bengali Brahmin, a Sikh or an Adivasi. We



were all that and perhaps fiercely more so than before, but these matters became personal affairs.” And, it is still amazing to notice the power of Netaji Bose as a popular icon in Indian national imagery, both as a martyr<sup>54</sup> and as the only real “warrior” among India’s founding fathers. In fact, Gandhi is mostly portrayed as a saint, Nehru as a statesman, but Bose’s iconography stands on its own and is mainly inspired by the adventure of the Azad Hind with strong reminiscences of 1857: the Sepoy Mutiny for the British, but the First War of Independence for the Indians.

The extreme diversity of the iconography of Rabindranath Tagore, portrayed as the protagonist of his opera *Valmiki Pratibha*, or by his nephew Gaganendranath as an artist disconnected with reality wandering in the skies (Figure 16) - reflects the trajectory of his life and thought) defies any classification. During his life, Tagore “kept renewing himself through daring new experiments and

**Figure 16: Poetical Scream: Latest Flight of the Poet. Query: Is it Cooperation or Non-cooperation? Gaganendranath Tagore. Osian’s**

<sup>52</sup>On this occasion, he was appointed President of the Congress Party, contesting a candidate supported by Gandhi. He then resigned in an act of submission to Gandhi’s authority and charisma.

<sup>53</sup>S. Bose, A. Jalal, pp. 132-33.

<sup>54</sup>After the disastrous retreat of the INA in the forests of Burma, he died in a plane crash in Taiwan while trying to reach Tokyo, but his body was never found, thus feeding all kind of legends about him.

explorations”]; and a simple analysis of his immense work—as a public intellectual, a poet and a novelist, a painter and a composer—shows how “the world within him changed time and time again.”<sup>55</sup>

As a young artist and intellectual, strongly influenced by his European education and British experiences, since the days of the ninth Hindu Mela organization (1875), when he was only fourteen, he was a fervent nationalist and activist, composing the musical score of the controversial *Bande Mataram*<sup>56</sup>; but after the turn of the century, his critique of nationalist excesses, especially during the Swadeshi movement and the “non-cooperation,” did not spare even Gandhi, with whom, however, he had a peculiar consonance of views.

Tagore grew increasingly convinced of the superiority of Indian civilization in his enduring ability to adopt and assimilate: “a single objective has always been motivating Bharatavarsha,<sup>57</sup> establish unity among diversity . . . She has not driven away anybody as alien . . . has adopted all, accepted everybody.”<sup>58</sup> His admiration for European civilization turned to disillusionment, and he became a staunch critic of the “evil” of the “mono-cultural nation-state,”<sup>59</sup> which he considered unfit to the civilizational diversity of India—another trait that he shared with Gandhi—a diversity that made him dream that India, “with its demonstrated capacity to live with and creatively use contradictions and inconsistencies, would produce a national ideology that would transcend nationalism.”<sup>60</sup>

His critique of Western civilization anticipated Gandhi’s, vindicating an alternative notion of modernity, focusing on the inherent peacefulness of Indian life compared with Western greed, idolatry of competition, and struggle for survival.<sup>61</sup>

A lot has been written about Tagore’s religion of the man and his universalism, which finally endorsed a larger, plural concept of India. His view of India as a civilization encompassing Africa and Asia across the Indian Ocean is strikingly contemporary and highlights a vision of civilizations as built across borders, which are not walls or barriers, but spaces where contiguity and exchanges help to negotiate differences of language and culture.<sup>62</sup>

I would add that a typical example of this attitude was Tagore’s immense prolificity as a writer and composer of songs (the so-called *Rabindrasangeet*). Some of his most famous songs

---

<sup>55</sup>S. Ray, *Pluralism and Cultural Conflict, Tagore’s View*.

<sup>56</sup>See below.

<sup>57</sup>India.

<sup>58</sup>R. Tagore, “Vision of History (Two Essays—April and August 1903),” Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2003.

<sup>59</sup>In a poem composed on the last day of the nineteenth century, he wrote: “The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance . . . Keep watch India . . . let your crown be of humility, your freedom the freedom of the soul.” In Bose (1998).

<sup>60</sup>In his thought-provoking essay “The Illegitimacy of Nationalism,” Asish Nandy termed Tagore as a patriot and an anti-imperialist. For Nandy, both Tagore and Gandhi represented dissident views of nationalist ideology.

<sup>61</sup>Like Gandhi, he defended the Indian social system: “Since in Bharatavarsha the social and occupational division of work are clearly laid down, the people in the higher echelons for the sake of preserving their identity do not drive away the lower people with disgrace. A Brahmin boy too has a Bagdi (untouchable) dada (uncle)”. Ibidem.

<sup>62</sup>Nandy has cleverly noted how his universalism and his motto “unity in diversity” have been deeply influential in shaping India’s foreign policy, finding expression in the principle of nonalignment and constitutional federalism, as gradually built on the recognition of the equal dignities of local cultures and languages (the motto was used for the first time in reference to the plurality of Indian languages).



used old English ballads and Scottish and Irish country tunes. For me, it has always been amazing to see how my Indian friends, who are so justifiably proud of their classical musical heritage, could fall in ecstasy for Tagore's Bengali rendition of British folk songs, such as *Kali Kali Bolo*, *Ohey Dayoney*, or most of the songs of *Valmiki Pratibha*.

### ***Hindu Nationalism***

Cristophe Jaffrelot has defined the period between 1890 and 1925 as essential for the coalescing of Hindu nationalism as a political ideology. Along the same lines, Sugata Bose<sup>63</sup> has pointed out the emergence of communal sentiments in the Muslim and Hindu elite, as their "anti-colonialism was influenced by their religious sensibilities," and also by the "colonial state's scheme of enumeration with its implicit division of its subjects in Hindu majority and Muslim minority" sanctioned by the granting of communal electorates in 1909, which legitimized religion and the use of religious symbolism as an instrument for mass mobilization.

*Hindutva, Who Is a Hindu* (1917), by V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966) can be defined as the founding text of Hindu nationalism in its most exclusivist form. Savarkar—a Chitpavan Brahmin from Maharashtra<sup>64</sup>—reshaped some of the ideas of the late nineteenth century modernist and anti-modernist movements (especially the Arya Samaj), forging the idea of Hindutva (Hinduness) as the foundation the Indian nation and identifying the loyalty to the motherland India mainly in religious terms."<sup>65</sup>

More or less in the same period, under the influence of the Arya Samaj leadership, the Hindu Mahasabha (1920) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (1925) were founded partially in response to the increasing communalization of Indian politics<sup>66</sup> and the alleged pro-Muslim moderate policy of the Congress Party. The two organizations, which espoused and reelaborated Savarkar's program,<sup>67</sup> shared a sort of symbiotic relationship and basic convergence of objectives and methods, through, for instance, emphasis on social networks and on the education of youth, increasingly shaped along the lines of the paramilitary programs for physical hygiene promoted by the Fascist and Nazi governments in Italy and Germany.<sup>68</sup> The relationship between these

---

<sup>63</sup>S. Bose, "Nation, Reason and Religion," *Economic and Political Weekly* 1 August 1998.

<sup>64</sup>It is worth noting that most of the early Hindu nationalist leadership belonged to this Maharashtran upper caste.

<sup>65</sup>According to Savarkar, only Hindus can be considered true Indians, as Christians and Muslims owe their loyalty to Jerusalem or the Mecca, respectively. For him, "a Hindu means a person who regards the land of Bharat Varsha as his holy land that is the cradle of his religion." Along the same lines, the president of Hindu Mahasabha, Bhai Parmanand (previously president of the Arya Samaj) stated in 1933: "Hindustan is the land of Hindus alone; Muslims and Christians and other nations living in India are only our guests." M.J. Akbar, *Nehru: the Making of India*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 177-80. Finally, it is worth noting how Savarkar was influenced by European nationalist movements and epics, and in particular by the Italian Risorgimento, founding a movement modeled on Giuseppe Mazzini's *Giovane Italia*.

<sup>66</sup>Attributed by most historians to the Morey-Pinto reform in 1909, which divided India into electoral constituencies, confirming the separation of Hindu and Muslim electorates and assuring that Muslims, who were more or less one-quarter of the the Indian population, were overrepresented, in some periods accounting for 11 out of the 27 members of vice-royal Council.

<sup>67</sup>Savarkar was President of the Hindu Mahasabha from 1937 to 1942.

<sup>68</sup>During one of his visits to Italy, one of the founders of RSS, B.S. Moonjee, was deeply influenced by Mussolini and the Fascist model of the paramilitary organization of youth. M. Casolari, "Hindutva's Foreign Tie-up in the 1930s," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 January 2000

movements and totalitarian governments in Europe was faithfully recorded by British intelligence: “It is perhaps no exaggeration to assert that the Sangh hopes to be in future India what the Fascisti are to Italy and the Nazis to Germany.”<sup>69</sup>

Over the past two decades, the amount of literature dedicated to Hindu nationalism and fundamentalism is simply impressive, and the subject continues to draw the attention of scholars, historians, and intellectuals. As to the ideology of these movements, please see the footnote below for some literature relevant to the subject.<sup>70</sup> It is important, however, to stress again the importance for Hindu nationalist ideologues, such as Savarkar and later Gowalkar, of the concept of purification and return to origins, as well as their understanding of the evocative power of religious epics as historical narratives, echoing somehow Bankimchandra, but also Gandhi.<sup>71</sup>

Hindutva, however, more than a coherent system of thought, seems a mixture of Orientalist, modernist, and anti-modernist ideas, drawing inspiration, too, from racial and ethnic theories of myths and origins, in line with some of the prevailing European schools of thought of their times: the ideology of the movement “evolved by high-caste socio-religious reformers anxious to preserve a Hindu culture and order by imitating some of the more robust features of the West and the otherwise stigmatized Semitic religions.”<sup>72</sup>

Hindu nationalism in the fundamentalist version propagated by the RSS and the Mahasabha had limited impact on Indian society and politics; the “partition” massacres of 1947 were parts of a much bigger picture where the role of Hindu extremists was very limited.<sup>73</sup> The main strains were the progressive communalization of the whole of Indian politics starting in the first decade of the twentieth century, the struggle for power between the Muslim League and the Congress (as well as within the Congress), and, naturally, the “*cupio dissolvi*” of the politics of the British Empire in its tormented path towards self-annihilation.

It is worth noting how Nehru's misunderstanding of the religious factor<sup>74</sup> and Gandhi's condescendence on the political compulsions of Hindu communalism left too much ground within the Congress and its structure to religious majoritarian strains that were the natural allies of Hindu nationalists. Along the same lines, just after the assassination of Gandhi by Nathuram Godse<sup>75</sup> on January 30, 1948, we can read this somehow diminutively bureaucratic description of the RSS by the Congress informative branch: “Started in Najpur some sort of Hindu Boys (sic) Scout movement. Gradually it developed into a communal militarist organisation with violent tendencies.

---

<sup>69</sup>National Archives of India, Home Poll Department, 88/33, 1933. Along this line, it is worth quoting Savarkar, who in 1938 wrote: “The Indian Muslims are on the whole more inclined to identify themselves and their interests with Muslims outside India than Hindus who live next door, like Jews in Germany.” See Casolari (2000).

<sup>70</sup>See, for instance, the classic works of Cristophe Jaffrelot and Peter Van der Veer, or, more recently, of Martha Nussbaum.

<sup>71</sup>The Gandhian rhetoric of Ram Raj clearly struck a sympathetic chord for Hindu nationalists; like Gandhi, for instance, they adopted the sixteenth-century Tulsidas version of *The Ramayana*, which was well known in the Hindi-speaking areas.

<sup>72</sup>C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics. 1925 to 1990*. Hurst & Company, London, 1996, p. 552.

<sup>73</sup>Though it is also fair to remember the close association of some of the leaders of the Congress with the RSS leadership, as well as the relevant presence of RSS activists within the ranks of the party.

<sup>74</sup>An example of which is his famous statement in early 1938: “I have examined the so-called communal question through the telescope and, if there is nothing, what can you see?”

<sup>75</sup>A former member of RSS who was assistant to President Hedgewar in 1932-33.

The RSS has been purely Maharashtrian brahmin organisation . . . There is no constitution of the organisation; its aims and objects have never been clearly defined. The general public is usually told that its aim is only physical training . . . There are no records or proceedings of the RSS organisation, no membership registers are maintained.”<sup>76</sup>

The shunning of the RSS after the assassination of Gandhi, the strength of Nehru's secularism as a national ideology in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the upper-caste bias<sup>77</sup> of the movement are among the reasons for its very poor performance in Indian politics prior to the 1980s.<sup>78</sup> In this period, the movement underwent a dramatic transformation,<sup>79</sup> rediscovering its original program and, in particular, its social and educational activities for youth; it also engaged in a serious effort to capture different social forces, beyond the Maharashtra upper-caste origin. The foundation of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP; Hindu Universal Assembly) in 1964, whose aim was the organization under a single umbrella of all the different Hindu sects and confessions, provided a new instrument for Hindu nationalists, who, since then, have been able to count on a social, a religious, and a political arm.<sup>80</sup>

Teamwork between these associations set the stage for the transformation of the political branch of the movement in a leading national party. The new BJP, born in 1980, won 88 seats in the 1989 elections and 161 in 1991, ruling the country for a short period in 1996 then again from 1998 until 2004.

Besides more systemic political and socio-economic reasons, which I will deepen in the next pages, this success is, in fact, the result of a concerted strategy and of the clever use of the margins of maneuver provided by the new dialectic between the three organizations. According to this dialectic, the political arm of the movement can present itself as somehow moderate, while the two other arms, and especially the RSS with its powerful social network of 7-8 million activists and its extremist youth organization, Bajrang Dal, can express more easily the “gut feelings” of the “people.” This “division of labor,” as it has been called by one of India’s foremost political analysts, is just part of a much more complex picture in which the symbiosis between these organizations is much deeper, as the greater part of the 4-5 million activists of the BJP comes mostly from the ranks of the RSS, and the elites of the three organizations share deep loyalties of community, caste, and class.

---

<sup>76</sup>National Archives of India, correspondence of Sardar Patel. In Casolari (2000).

<sup>77</sup>As I have noted, the ideologues and the leadership of the movement since its origins belonged mainly to the Maharashtra upper castes who have always declared their attachment to the caste system as a glorious Indian institution; until recently, Hindu nationalist leadership swore allegiance on the *Manusmriti*, a notorious anti-*Dalit* text.

<sup>78</sup>The Jan Sangh, which was founded in 1950 as a political federative force to which both RSS and the Mahasabha made reference until its dissolution and the creation of the BJP in the 1980s, gained only three seats in the 1952 general elections for the Lok Sabha (the Indian Parliament). Some of its leaders, however, managed to maintain good relationships and exercise a degree of influence on some of the prominent members of the Congress.

<sup>79</sup>The RSS can count on 22,000 schools and 45,000 units working in slums; every day, 4 million people attend the early morning *shakhas* (schools), where, dressed in khaki uniforms, they engage in gymnastic exercises, martial arts, sports, and ideological indoctrination activities.

<sup>80</sup>Meanwhile in Maharashtra, Bal Tackeray, a former cartoonist, founded another local party, the Shiv Sena,<sup>80</sup> with a strong xenophobic message, which at the origin was opposed to the non-maharashtrians, then rallied the anti-Muslim rhetoric of other organizations.

## *A New Indian Common Sense?*

As we have seen, there was always a space for Hindu nationalism in Indian nationalist thought and politics; and there is a continuous ideological thread running from the Indian revivalist movement and the Arya Samaj to the RSS and the BJP via the Congress Party. Naturally, motives, programs, and methods changed over the course of decades, but the roots of the triad BJP/RSS/VHP run deep through the heart of Indian society and at the threshold of its encounter with Western modernity.

From this point of view, the renewed legitimacy of public piety and religious symbolism in the public discourse about national identity is undoubtedly at the roots of the success of these movements<sup>81</sup>—and there are those who highlighted how Indira Gandhi's extensive political use of religion in her later years paved the way to this process. On the other hand, these organizations have made a great effort in the past twenty years to reach out to different groups of the population including the *Dalits*,<sup>82</sup> playing down their aggressive Brahminic character and introducing programs in favor of the lower strata of Indian society.<sup>83</sup>

There are, however, additional reasons that could help explain the impressive performances of these organizations over the past twenty years, as well as the diffusion of the Hindutva ideology within large sections of Indian society, especially among the middle classes.

For Ashutosh Varshney, the rise of Hindu nationalism must be considered first as a response to secular nationalism and to two separatist nationalisms (Kashmir and Punjab)<sup>84</sup>—while Sunil Khilnani points to the “emergency” as the first signal of the impending crisis. As a matter of fact, the fifteen years between the “emergency” (1975-1977) and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi (1991) witnessed a series of unprecedented challenges for India: the confrontation with the Sikhs, resulting in the massacres of Delhi after the murder of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984; the deterioration of the situation in Kashmir; and the famous Shah Bano case.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, during the same period, the decay of the Congress Party and its system of patronage, the widespread corruption of politicians and public officials, the worsening of the economy, and the explosion of the unresolved social and castal tensions as exemplified by the anti-Mandal agitation, were all part of a wider systemic crisis that fully justified the mounting anxiety of the Indian people, especially of the middle class, about the future of the country.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup>Though one could argue indefinitely about their adherence to Hindu ethics or whether they are really representative of the Hindu religious ocean.

<sup>82</sup>For instance, including Ambedkar in daily prayers, and projecting him as a social reformer; or creating affiliate social associations to work within *Dalit* communities. See also Pralay Kanungo, “Co-opting *Dalits* into the Hindutva Fold,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 19 May 2007.

<sup>83</sup>They had considerable success, also thanks to the “dark side” of the economic reforms, which is putting a strong competitive pressure on the poorest strata of the population, in particular *Dalits* and Muslims. The association of *Dalits* with the Hindutva massacres of the Muslim population in Gujarat in 2002, which has almost no precedent, strikes a peculiar contrast with the recent past, when, as it happened in 1980 and in 1984, the same *Dalits* were the targets of Hindutva activists.

<sup>84</sup>A. Varshney, “Contested Meanings: Hindu National Identity, Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Anxiety” *Daedalus*, Summer 1993, 122, 3, p. 227.

<sup>85</sup>Shah Bano was a divorced Muslim woman who asked for alimony to be provided by her former husband according to Indian civil law. Rajiv Gandhi substantially supported the application of shari'a against Indian law in this case, thus implicitly denying the uniform civil code (Art. 44 of the Indian Constitution).

<sup>86</sup>See, among others, Varshney (1993).

But there are two more issues that deserve to be deepened. The extinction of the old generation of activists—or their marginalization by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay—was one of the main reasons for the loosening of the relationship between the center and the periphery; this relationship was based on the old Congress network and on the loyalties inherited from the independence movement, which were an essential part of the mechanism of patronage balancing the rhetoric of socialism and centralized power in the public sector with socially conservative local power.<sup>87</sup>

Secondly, the growing working and financial relationships of Indian Muslims with the Middle East, the Persian Gulf states, and Pakistan played a major part in redefining the relationship between the different religious communities. After the tragedy of Partition, this relationship was based on mechanisms of contiguity and exchange; on the contrary, from the eighties the “superposing of external to internal borders”<sup>88</sup> in the Indian people’s imagination and in Indian society, especially in the urban areas, contributed to the renewed communalization of politics and interreligious relationships.

Set against this background, the profound transformations of Indian post-colonial society since 1991—accelerated by the renewed focus on economic reforms and liberalization policies—determined an unprecedented upward and downward mobility, which represented the perfect “humus” for the “rise of a fascist Hindutva brigade, and a strengthened upper-caste and middle-class allegiance to Hindu majoritarian ideological and political formations.”<sup>89</sup>

A sharp description of this process is given by Romila Thapar: “a new middle class . . . is effectively replacing a middle class that had its social base in the landed gentry and the urban professions and was closer to inclusive nationalism. The new middle class has a wider social base of many more middle castes identifying themselves as Hindus . . . Globalization has created new communities . . . greater inequalities of wealth even within the middle class fuel the aspirations and frustrations . . . this in turn results in intensified competition, insecurity, aggression and unemployment, and inevitably, in attack on the enemy within, in this case on religious minorities.”<sup>90</sup>

Great emphasis has also been placed on the role of television serials, like “The Mahabharata,” “The Chanakya,” and especially “The Ramayana,” to sustain the shift in the perception of religious symbolism by the Indian public and its connection with national identity; following the success of the TV serial, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu became the preferred subject for any kind of media (books, songs, audiocassettes,<sup>91</sup> videos, comic books for children) along the lines promoted by pro-Hindutva movements.<sup>92</sup> It is quite difficult to see a political project

---

<sup>87</sup>D. Ludden, *Making India Hindu*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 17-18.

<sup>88</sup>I am using Arjun Appadurai’s formula.

<sup>89</sup>Chakravarty (2006) p. 39.

<sup>90</sup>R. Thapar, “Politics and the Rewriting of History in India,” *Critical Quarterly*, Nos. 1-2, pp. 196-97.

<sup>91</sup>Audiocassettes are a very popular instrument for propaganda and mass mobilization. Recordings of speeches, sermons, and poems were instrumental in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which led to the destruction of the Babri Mosque. Ludden 2005, pp. 131-133.

<sup>92</sup>The ability of the BJP and its allies to understand the new trends and to master the complex relationships between religious and nationalist symbolism, especially through the figure of Ram, must be recognized. On his shoulders, the BJP and the RSS built their aggressive march towards power, through the Rath Yatra of L.K. Advani, the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, and the consequent destruction, on 6 December 1992, of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, until the victory in the 1998 elections.



behind the decision by the Indian national television to reserve the “hegemony-building time” (Sunday morning) for these serials; it is perhaps more appropriate to interpret this decision as a sign of the ability of Indian television managers to understand and accommodate the tastes and interests of a new public, as well as to those of a disillusioned and confused old public.

Summarizing, the dialectic between the old and new middle class required a radical reassessment—to say the least—of the notion of national identity as designed by Nehru and the postcolonial Indian elite. The vision of economic progress and development, as politically and morally justified by the imperative of the eradication of poverty, was at odds with the mantras of contemporary neo-liberalism—not to mention the widespread corruption and inefficiency of the public sector, which was supposed to uphold the economic pillar of the Nehruvian vision. Furthermore, secularism as an ideology did not achieve its objectives in a society faced with mounting religious and social tensions. Finally, the challenges posed by globalization and the radical transformations of Indian society exacerbated the anxiety of the Indian middle class and added to the material and psychological unease of its new unrooted social actors, who are among the main supporters of Hindutva, and of the new monolithic Hinduism propagated by VHP, RSS, and the BJP.

After the defeat of the BJP-led coalition in 2004, some analysts emphasized, in particular, the impact on the elections of the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, which alienated the moderate supporters of the party. A different picture has been portrayed by those who pointed out the misconceived campaign based on the slogan “Shining India,” as well as the renewed ability of the Congress Party to build a successful network of alliances with regional and community-based parties.

The analysis of the 2004 elections shows how the BJP led coalition “secured more votes among upper caste, upper class, educated, male and urban voters, than among their less privileged counterparts . . . The underprivileged votes remained fragmented between the Congress, its allies, the left, the BSP, and other regional formations.”<sup>93</sup> From this picture, and considering the numbers of what is now considered the new Indian middle class, it is clear that a relevant part of the latter voted for the Congress.

On the other hand, there is clear evidence that, beyond party loyalties, a new middle ground is being reshaped along exclusivist ideas, a majoritarian set of mind in favor of a clearer definition of group boundaries along religious and community lines. A survey, conducted during the elections across political, social, and religious affiliations, showed that 42 percent of the people interviewed were in favor of separate community laws; 45 percent were for the ban of interreligious marriages; 44 percent wanted to ban conversions; and 43 percent were against intercaste marriages.<sup>94</sup> This picture seems to confirm that, even if the BJP lost the battle of elections, its policies could be winning the war of building a new Indian common sense based on communal cleavages.

Actually, this is only one side of the mirror. It is true that the past two decades have destabilized some of the ideas that were at the heart of the post-colonial state, giving a renewed legitimacy to “new ideas with a long past.” But these ideas, and in particular the strength of community and caste boundaries, have always been a part of India’s post-colonial modernity, even at the height of Nehru’s experiment. Their current visibility is mainly linked with the unprecedented social mobility of the past twenty years, which, as I have noted, is bringing new social actors to the

---

<sup>93</sup>Y. Yadaav, “The Elusive Mandate of 2004,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 18 December 2004.

<sup>94</sup>S. Palshikar, “Majoritarian Middle Ground” *Economic and Political Weekly* 18 December 2004.

forefront and posing new challenges and unresolved tensions, especially within the newcomers' common sense and their perception of tradition and its relationship with modernity.

### *Crisis of Secularism*

This chapter would not be complete without reference to the debate that took place in India in the second half of the 1980s about the crisis of the secular state; this debate and its protagonists have often been misinterpreted as paving the way to the resurgence of the “anti-secular” discourse in Indian politics as argued by the Hindutva proponents. On the contrary, it seems to me that this debate and the arguments raised especially by Ashish Nandy and T.N. Madan among others were far-sighted, locating the crisis of Indian secularism in the framework of the wider systemic crisis of Indian society, as reflected in the continuing historical disjuncture between the elite and the masses.

Madan focused mainly on the construction of an Indian ideology of religious pluralism and tolerance. His critique of secularism as arrogance of the elites is directly linked to the vision of Indian traditions, society, and polity as essentially based on an original hierarchical order. He defines secularism as “the dream of a minority which wants to shape the majority in its own image. . . For the secularist minority to stigmatize the majority as primordially oriented and to preach secularism to the latter as the law of human existence is moral arrogance and worse . . . political folly . . . because it fails to recognize the immense importance of religion in the lives of the peoples of South Asia.”<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, Madan also spotlighted the major cleavage between people's religious pluralism and the narrow vision of the elite regarding public piety, which is often considered as a mere political instrument: “Contrary to what many of us believe, there is considerable historical and ethnographic evidence that the common people of this country, whatever their religious background, are comfortable with religious pluralism in one form or another and practice it. The traditional elite of the nineteenth century, from whom today's intelligentsia have descended, excoriated such pluralism as the superstitious ways of the masses.”<sup>96</sup> Therefore, within the Indian experience we must distinguish the religious pluralism of the masses from the secularist pluralism of the elites, which “bears the imprint of the Western experience,” where secularization meant primarily the “demonopolization” of religious traditions, a monopoly that never existed in South Asia.<sup>97</sup>

As a matter of fact, the first intellectual offensive came just after the Punjab crisis and the Delhi pogroms against the Sikhs following Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. In his *Anti-secularist Manifesto*, Nandy deeply criticizes secularism as an ideology. His point of departure is mainly Gandhian, and is based essentially on the importance of religion as “soft power” and as a fundamental tool for governance. This is even more so in our current globalized context where the economic and social tensions are much higher than in the past. Nandy sets a basic distinction between religion as faith and religion as ideology, emphasizing the need to reassess the

---

<sup>95</sup>According to which religion has primacy over politics; it must not only be free from state interference, but it is called upon to play a major role in building the moral order in the Gandhian sense.

<sup>96</sup>Madan (1997) pp. 276-78.

<sup>97</sup>More or less along the same lines, D. Chakrabarty highlighted the inherent contradictions of secular intellectuals' “colonial hyper-rationalism,” which affects their imagination in addressing the issue of religiously informed identities in South Asia, as well as the understanding of the place of the religious in Indian public and political life.

public space of religion as faith, as the values of religious tolerance and understanding are essential to build a more tolerant society: “the ills of religion have found political expression but the strengths of it have not been available for checking corruption and violence in public life.”<sup>98</sup>

But Nandy’s analysis digs deeper into the transformations of Indian society and into the disruptions of the traditional community-based structure as a consequence of economic migration, urbanization, and exposure to new values and lifestyles. I would add that, in the Indian religiously fragmented context, the separation from the community might mean the disconnection from one’s religious tradition and the moral order built upon it; the many surrogate Hinduisms available on the thriving “market” of Indian spirituality, including the exclusivist version propagated by the Hindutva front, represent then a suitable alternative to fill this vacuum. Nevertheless, it is true—as Nandy says—that a substantial part of the newcomers to the Indian middle class, who come from the different communities, carry with them an embedded sense of tolerance that enriches their choices with a high degree of complexity, subtlety, and rationality.

Furthermore, the coincidence between the aftermath of the Delhi massacre and Nandy’s radical critique of Indian ideological secularism is not without a reason. In Nandy’s vision, the state is not only the enforcer of an ideology that does not exist any more; it has always been alien to the hearts and minds of a substantial part of the Indian people. The omissions, or worse, the complicity of the state with the massacres in Delhi in 1984, in Mumbai and elsewhere in 1992-93, and in Gujarat in 2002 are symptoms of a substantial disruption of the functions of the state as the guarantor of neutrality towards different religions and communities—which should instead be a major part of the Indian secular ethos as embedded in the 1950 Constitution.



*Figure 17: Bhakti besides the Varanasi Ghats, Anonymous from Bengal. Osian’s*

---

<sup>98</sup>A Nandy, “An Anti-Secularist Manifesto,” *Seminar 314* (1985), p. 17. In line with his previous writings, he is also extremely critical of ideological modernity, as “fundamentalism feeds itself as much in religion as in modernity.”





Figure 18: Mohan Sinha's 1857. Movie Poster (1950). Osian's



## Conclusion

According to a BBC poll in 2007, seven out of ten Indians show a positive sense of identity.<sup>1</sup> Indians seem proud to be Indian, but do they share any common vision of what this actually means? I have tried to answer these questions, amplifying my explanations with images that reflect the complexity of national and post-national imagination, as well as the divide between the imageries of the elites and the middle class, and of the rest of the country.

Referring to the construction of Italian national identity and to the tormented country's past of (disputed) cultural continuity and (undisputed) political disunity, Gramsci wrote: "in the history of our national culture there is no continuity or unity. The affirmation of continuity or unity is only rhetorical or amounts to a mere evocative propaganda. It is a practical act which aims to create artificially that which does not exist...It is anti-historical intellectual acrobatics...history was political propaganda, it aimed to create national unity—that is the nation—from the outside and against tradition."

On a similar tone, Indian intellectuals have often lamented the fact that: "For centuries India was not a nation in any conventional sense of the word. Not only she did not possess the shared language, culture, and national identity that have defined many nations; it had more social and cultural variety than even the continent of Europe."<sup>2</sup> It is indeed paradoxical to notice how this language echoes the views of the British colonial administrators. This is also a sign of how the debate on Indian national identity has somehow freed itself of the Nehruvian nation-building ideology and joined the wider discussion on the so-called crisis of the nation-state and of national identity as a conceptual framework to understand the global world and as a tool for governance of complex multicultural state entities.

As I have tried to explain in my methodological notes, the crisis of the nation-state is twofold: the state is losing its ability to guarantee and safeguard its citizens, especially through economic and social policies; it is also losing most of its traditional instruments of higher governance, and is, therefore, obliged to renegotiate the new boundaries of its power with stronger political, socio-economic, ethnic/communal, or local forces. In this context, the rise of ethnic and religious movements and their successes in terms of appealing to basic notions of community and "nation" are truly "local solutions to global problems" and represent the response from different layers of the society to the challenges posed by globalization.

It is worth noting how this process is no longer an exclusive feature of the West; it directly concerns the rest of the world, and especially the two subcontinental states of the East. From this point of view, the Indian case bears strong resemblances to China, both in terms of the tensions arising in the two societies and of the strength of the respective national experiences. Common traits



*Figure 19: Gandhiji with Subhash Chandra Bose, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, Pandit Nehru and Bharat Mata. Hand-painted Collages from Jodhpur. Osian's*

<sup>1</sup>*Times of India*, 5 February 2007.

<sup>2</sup>P. Mishra, "Impasse in India," *The New York Review of Books*, 28 June 2007, p. 49.



are, just to name a few, the importance of orthopraxis versus orthodoxy, linguistic diversity, the relative strength of regional identities, and the growing social inequalities as well as the increasing disparities between regions, not to mention the role played in both countries by the very active and assertive diasporas and the common status of the fastest developing economies of the world, a status that carries similar challenges in terms of securing energy supply, management of natural resources, and sustainable development. Finally, both India and China have to cope with the homogenizing impact of Western culture; among the various collateral damages of this process, the growth of strong nationalist sentiments—often redirected towards traditional enemies, Pakistan and Japan, respectively—is a major feature of both subcontinents.

Since 1991, the explosion of the Indian economy and the rising of the Hindutva movement have produced an amazing number of books and essays dedicated to India, particularly to Indian identity. It could be argued that, from this point of view, the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya truly marked a turning point in India's self-understanding.

I have made reference to Sunil Khilnani's *Idea of India*, which echoes both Tagore and Bose, acknowledging India's "capacity to sustain internal diversity"; for him, any attempt to impose homogeneity would simply mean the collapse of the Indian nation and Indian identity. Along similar lines, Ashutosh Varshney points to syncretism, pluralism, and tolerance as essential attributes of Indian culture, and Shashi Taroor defines India as a "plural nation, where diversity is as natural as sunshine." Amartya Sen, in his essay dedicated to the Tatas<sup>3</sup> in *The Argumentative Indian*, recognizes how the independence movement did not produce a clear and homogeneous notion of Indian identity. He too espouses a wider interpretation of Tagore's view about Indian identity as inclusive (within its territory and its people) and universal (beyond its borders) and sharply criticizes the identification of Indian identity with Hinduism.

I feel also indebted to the work of Leela Fernandes on India's new middle class and to Rupal Oza's investigation concerning the impact of globalization on the Idea of India. The latter in particular focuses on the displacement of control onto national culture and identity as a result of India's intensified encounter with globalization. The reaffirmation of India's identity and national culture is achieved by the state and some actors in Indian civil society by fortifying rigid gender and sexual identities. On the same issue, a different perspective is given by Uma Chakravathy and Himani Bannerjee (among others), who draw a parallel between the rise of Hindutva and the aggressive display of virility and aggressive masculinity,<sup>4</sup> which would exemplify the nation-state attempt to compensate for the destabilizing effects of globalization by attempting to control cultural identities.

In his *Being Indian*, P.K. Varma's main concern appears to be the demystification of the many common notions of the Indian mind as inherently "otherworldly, tolerant, nonviolent, democratic." He also defines coexistence and tolerance as essential traits of Indian identity, but he sees them as determined by pragmatism and resilience more than by a civilizational dimension.<sup>5</sup> On the opposite side of the spectrum we find finally "The Indians" as portrayed by Sudhir and Katharina Kakar, who try to elaborate the concept of "Indianness" as mainly based on "Hinduness." For the Kakars, Indian identity has been built through centuries on Hindu cultural traits: the

---

<sup>3</sup>The Parsi family who founded Indian capitalism. Tata is still one of the greatest Indian conglomerates.

<sup>4</sup>Exemplified by the "muscularization" of Ram or by values prevailing in TV series like *Chanakya*.

<sup>5</sup>P.K. Varma, *Being Indian*, William Heinemann, London, 2005.

extended family, the hierarchical notion of social relations, a cultural imagery embedded in myths and legends, a deeply contextual and relativistic way of thinking.<sup>6</sup>

I would start from this definition to elaborate on the notion of common sense, which in the Kakars' analysis is somehow superposed with the concept of national identity. In Gramscian terms, common sense is the philosophy of daily life, "a sort of collective noun, like religion"; it refers to values, views taken for granted, and symbolic practices, and is perhaps the fundamental scope of action of any hegemony-building discourse. Again Gramsci had probably in mind the failures of the elitist Risorgimento to gain the support of the Italian peasants and to build a strong national consciousness, especially in Southern Italy, when he wrote: "The principal elements of common sense are provided by religion, and consequently the relationship between common sense and religion is much more intimate than that between common sense and the philosophical systems of intellectuals."<sup>7</sup> Any hegemonic project must work on the common sense of its own social group and of the society as a whole, especially when it has to relate to new social conditions and the emergence of new collective actors. As far as India is concerned, this has been the case, for instance, of Gandhism, of the building of Indian post-colonial identity, and, *mutatis mutandis*, of the rise of Hindu nationalism in the last two decades.

This issue has a wider significance in terms of hegemony-building processes; actually, as far as contemporary India is concerned, it is quintessentially practical, as the construction of a new hegemonic common sense is very much linked to the growing economic, social, cultural, and religious tensions as a consequence of globalization and the key role that the new Indian middle class is reluctantly playing at the crossroads of these tensions.

In my methodological notes, I referred to the polarization of human experience as described by Z. Bauman as one of the main features of globalization. In this context, the traditional distinction between the elites and the masses is just an element of the much more complex interaction between the "globals" and the "locals"; this is evident in India, where new varied local elites, which cut across traditional caste and class categories, have emerged thanks to democratization processes, the Internet and electronic revolution, access to education and travel, exposure to foreign media and Western influence, and the strengthening of domestic and transnational civil societies.

This appears to be a global phenomenon indeed. Abdellah Hammoudi, professor at Princeton University, is truly a member of the cosmopolitan elite; in his *Une Saison à la Mecque*, he uses the term "techniciens" to define this emerging local elite in the Arab world, comprising mainly engineers, craftsmen, or small entrepreneurs. "Les techniciens" accompany him in his *Haji* and manage to gain the leadership of groups of pilgrims, thanks to a bookish and simplified version of *Wahabi* Islam. He cannot hide his distaste for them, but at the end of the pilgrimage, he is alone at the airport waiting for his plane, separated from his fellow pilgrims and unable to understand their dynamics.<sup>8</sup> The same process is happening in several former third-world countries where post-independence, cosmopolitan, secular elites are destroying themselves, mainly through the dynamics of patronage and corruption, and new groups are emerging, mostly from religiously affiliated

---

<sup>6</sup>S. and K. Kakar, *The Indians: Portrait of a People*. I just want to highlight how this definition of Indian identity—which has often been repeated to me more or less elaborately—sounds very familiar to an Italian ear, bearing strong similarities with the so-called *familismo amorale*, which is considered the prevailing mental framework in the south of Italy.

<sup>7</sup>A. Gramsci, Selections from *Prison Notebooks*, 1971, p. 420.

<sup>8</sup>A. Hammoudi, *Une saison à la Mecque*. Recit de pèlerinage, 2005 Editions du Seuil, Paris.

institutions—filling the gaps left by the old elites and building a new relationship with the people, especially through religious and social networks.<sup>9</sup>

As I tried to explain, India is in my view the perfect laboratory to understand how the interplay between global capital and culture and local and national societies is reshaping concepts like elites, hegemony, and the notions of the middle and working class. In this context, considerable emphasis has been put on the new Indian middle class; and rightly so, though we must be very careful in defining the borders of the Indian middle class, keeping in mind how fluid and peculiar this notion is in a country like India.<sup>10</sup>

The new Indian middle class lies, however, for better or worse, at the center of the process of redefinition of Indian national identity and is involved in most of the tensions on which the country's future depends.

First, on the economic and social side, the current tale of two Indias, “an India of booming businesses, growing cities, and a vibrant middle class, and an India of struggling agriculture, poor villages and a large lower class,”<sup>11</sup> is simply unsustainable, especially in terms of increasing social and regional imbalances.

Notwithstanding the arguments of the theorists of the “demographic window of opportunity,” at current demographic trends, Indian agriculture cannot simply continue to play the role of a decompression chamber for excess Indian workers. Furthermore, privatization of the remaining public companies, agricultural reform, and more flexibility in labor regulations are considered essential for the future of the Indian economy; but the much-invoked reforms would, at least in the short/medium term, lead to tragic scenarios for large sectors of the impoverished working class, touching also upon some strata in the middle class.

In this context, the linkage between economic reforms and the consolidation of political consciousness irrespective of caste barriers among the “losers of the games” is a sign of the further acceleration of polarization processes in Indian society. Even more so, if we consider phenomena like the riots concerning the Narmada dams, with the forced displacement of millions of peasants and tribals, or the Nandigram Special Economic Zone, and the new Tata plant in Singur, with forcible acquisition of land with the consent and support of the West Bengal communist government. Not to mention the thriving Naxalites insurgency,<sup>12</sup> defined by some as the greatest threat to the country, and by others<sup>13</sup> as the only effective response to the worst consequences of globalization and to the complicity of the Indian state with the winners of the game of globalization (multinational or Indian companies supported by corrupt central or local governments) at the

---

<sup>9</sup>See, among others, L. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, Princeton University Press, 2006 about Hezbollah and contemporary Shi'ism in Lebanon, or C. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, Columbia University Press, 2006, about Islamic revival and the construction of public piety in Egypt through the media of cassette sermons.

<sup>10</sup>L. Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

<sup>11</sup>A. Varshney, “India's Democratic Challenge,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, Vol. 86, Issue 2, pp. 93-106.

<sup>12</sup>The Naxalites are named after Naxalbari, a small village in West Bengal, where a violent uprising of a local section of the Communist Party took place in 1967. Those involved were radical, often violent, revolutionary communist groups belonging to various forms of Maoism. Initially, the movement had its epicenter in West Bengal. In recent years, it has spread into less developed areas of rural central and eastern India and is becoming more and more aggressive. On 15 March 2007, Naxalite forces attacked a police station in the Bijan district (Chhattisgarh), killing 55 policemen.

<sup>13</sup>A. Roy, “L'India brucia” *Internazionale*, 19-25 Ottobre 2007.

expense of the “losers,” the rural and urban impoverished layers of society, as well as the some groups traditionally marginalized like the tribals and the *Dalits*.

Second, on the cultural and religious side, the new middle class is considered the main supporter of exclusivist Hindu movements. I have already explained how this process, developed in the 1970s and 1980s, came about due to several reasons, which all contributed to the mounting anxiety of the Indian people, especially the middle class, about the future of the country: the worsening of the economy; the threat posed by two separatist nationalisms in Kashmir and Punjab; the decay of the Congress Party and of its system of patronage; the extinction of the old generation of activists—or their marginalization by Indhira Gandhi and her son Sanjay; the loosening of the relationship between the center and the periphery, which was based on the old Congress’ loyalties inherited from the independence movement; the widespread corruption of politicians and public officials; the explosion of the unresolved social and castal tensions as exemplified by the anti-Mandal agitation; but also the renewed legitimacy of public piety and religious symbolism in the public discourse exemplified by Indira Gandhi's extensive political use of religion in her later years.

Finally, it must be stressed how the growing working and financial relationships of Indian Muslims with Muslim countries, including Pakistan, played a major role in redefining the relationship between the different religious communities, with the superposing of external to internal borders in the Indian people’s imagination and in Indian society, especially in the urban areas. A major feature of this process is the role of the Indian Muslim Mafia based in Mumbai<sup>14</sup> and its links with the Pakistani secret service (ISI—Inter-Services Intelligence), which is considered to be behind the Mumbai bombings in 1993 and virtually any bombing in India in the past 15 years. It goes well beyond the scope of this research to elaborate on the international dimension of this process, though it is clear that the unresolved relationship with Pakistan (and with her own Muslim community) lies at the heart of India’s quest for the redefinition of its own national identity.

As a matter of fact, the exclusivism of the Hindutva movements and their ideological targeting of minorities, especially Muslims, fit perfectly in the framework of the new competitive tensions arising amidst the “locals,” those who are hit the hardest by globalization and neoliberal policies: the pattern of interreligious riots in Mumbai in 1992-93, or in Gujarat in 2002, shows the importance of economic reasons for the mobilization of the foot soldiers of Hindutva, belonging to impoverished upper castes, or lower castes, or even *Dalits*, either against Muslim traders in Mumbai, or against petty Muslim traders and the proletariat in Gujarat.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the organization of these movements, the refinement and increasing flexibility of their ideologies, as well as the ability of the leadership in building a consensus both inside and outside India confirms the emergence of a new typology of local elite whose “localism” is instrumental in understanding the mechanisms of mass mobilization and the priorities of their own people and whose “internationalism” helps to position their objectives in a broader political and economic framework and to master propaganda and mass communication.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Dawood Ibrahim, who is considered to be the most powerful godfather of the Indian Muslim Mafia, has been managing his affairs safely from Karachi and Dubai.

<sup>15</sup>Referring to Gujarat, David Ludden has emphasized the links between socio-economic tensions and Hindutva violence, as exemplified by the involvement of tribals and *Dalits* in the riots: “At one stroke killers eliminated the Adivasi’s creditor and the Baniyas’ [merchant caste] Muslim competitors. In towns and cities across Gujarat, *Dalits* looted Muslim shops and homes, to reap the plunder of class war as they liberated real estate for Hindu investors.” Ludden (2005) p. XV.

<sup>16</sup>From this perspective, the dichotomy between secularism and Hindu nationalism cannot be interpreted solely in terms of modernity versus pre-modernity—and in my personal experience, I was often puzzled by the “modernity”

This process is far more complex and goes well beyond the role of the new middle class, directly involving other layers of society, which should, in principle, be immune from Hindu fundamentalism, like the *Dalits* or the tribals, who have been for decades/centuries the main target of discrimination and violence. In this context, the new balance of power makes it extremely difficult for the structures of the state to cope with crisis situations and to resist surrendering to majoritarian pressures, especially when they are motivated by strong ideological or ethno-religious symbolism. This is even more true when the (allegedly) real interests at stake are those of its citizens left defenseless to cope with the new realities of a globalized economy: flexibility of labor, unemployment, increasing competition from domestic and foreign immigrants, crumbling social infrastructures, and so on. This situation actually brings new significance to the notion of competition as “the rule of the jungle” with a shift from the metaphorical realm to the actual terrain of the slaughtering of competitors and their families, of the disruption of rival businesses and destruction of shops, of the ethno/religious (and economic) cleansing of “other” groups as the most effective—or the only—way of regaining economic and social opportunities, as well as a new distorted political “dignity.”

This analysis is not an unconditional espousal of the theories attributing interreligious and interethnic tensions primarily to socioeconomic causes. Tempted as one could be to interpret these tensions through the lenses of “historical materialism” and class conflicts, we must recognize how the motivations of violence and hatred have become more and more complex in the globalized world.<sup>17</sup>

Fear,<sup>18</sup> uncertainty, the blurring of identities resulting from the exposure to new cultures and lifestyles—and the crumbling of the certainties and safety nets created by economic and cultural networks—represent an unprecedented threat for groups and individuals encouraging a new type of violence. Through the clash with the “enemy” and the physical elimination of the “other” and of his kin, especially of those who are disturbingly similar to us, we rebuild and reconsolidate our own identity redefining the borders between us and them, and between our society and a world that has become more and more threatening and difficult to understand.

Luckily enough, the process bringing Hindutva to the forefront of Indian politics does not seem to be sustained by a hegemonic common sense in Gramscian terms. The volatility of the social fabric in contemporary globalized India does not really allow for the consolidation of a clearly majoritarian thinking, as the middle class, albeit its pro-Hindutva bias, is deeply divided. Even more so, the concept of middle class appears to be highly disputable, as class and caste interests are still rallying and maintain a high degree of flexibility. Finally, Indian civil society—whose progressive

---

(in a positive sense) of the officers of the BJP, or even of the Shiv Sena, a modernity for which credit must be given to the contribution of the new middle class to these movements.

<sup>17</sup>For instance, Ashutosh Varshney has shown how communal riots in India are mainly an urban phenomenon: from 1950 to 1995, rural India—where two-thirds of the population live—accounted for only 4 percent of the total victims of the riots; furthermore, urban riots were mainly concentrated in certain areas such as Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Mumbai. He attributes this concentration to socio-economic tensions, but also to the decay of daily economic interaction and of the civic networks created during the independence movement, which were actually a major part of Gandhism and allowed Indian civil society to withstand exogenous shocks such as the partition, the desecration of holy places, and communal clashes in different parts of the country. A. Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Life*, Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>18</sup>From this point of view, it is interesting to note how the explosion of violence between communities is often characterized by similar patterns: the spark is often the fear and passions unleashed by uncontrolled voices and rumors—often fake or fabricated—about murders or acts of violence committed against members of one community. See, among others, R. Toscano, “La Violenza e le regole,” *Einaudi* 2006 and Appadurai (2006).



NGOs and activists come mainly from the middle class—is showing a high degree of maturation and awareness of the risks and danger of Hindu exclusivism for the future of the country.<sup>19</sup>

India is often portrayed as having failed in fostering an industrial revolution; that also means that she was not able to develop the kind of social and civic immunity that characterizes Western societies.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps we tend to forget too easily the importance of the political, social, and cultural revolutions that accompanied modernization processes in the West. One example of the major challenges facing Indian is education; compulsory education policies in Europe presented difficult choices for working-class and peasants communities, but those policies were successfully implemented by the state thanks to the support of social and civic networks—social and youth organizations, political parties, the intelligentsia, trade unions, and churches—which helped frame and shape a hegemonic message and served to ostracize any who failed to comply. In Gramscian terms, the middle class transformed itself in a “fundamental class,” shaping a new hegemonic message about the nation, the economy, and the society, which could also be shared by other classes.

Basically, even beyond ideological cleavages on some core issues, the alliance between the state, politics, and civil society was essential in sustaining the equitable growth of European societies. It could be argued that the unresolved contradictions between the many different visions of India (especially those of Gandhi and Nehru) made it impossible to follow a similar path. But it is clear that the major social, economic, political, and cultural challenges awaiting India require a similar alliance which can only be built on a common vision for the future. More than the tensions with Pakistan, or competition for markets and resources with China, Japan and the West, the renewal of this alliance, and especially its widening to the whole of India, irrespective of caste, class, or religious and ethnic affiliation, is crucial for the future of Bharatvarsha.



*Figure 20: Gandhi and Tagore in Shantiniketan, Osian's*

---

<sup>19</sup>A relevant factor is also the “sacralized” character of Indian elections, which as far as the middle class is concerned, have lost the appeal they once had, while they are still considered a fundamental right for the poor.

<sup>20</sup>For instance, in terms of effective trade unions and their links with political parties and pressure groups, working- and middle-class consciousness, and prioritization of sustainable development.