CURRENT HISTORY

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has given way to a public sphere of image and spectacle."*

The Rise of Hindu Populism
in India's Public Sphere

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I t is a paradox of contemporary scholarship that the notion of globalization has become commonplace, yet comparative analysis captures only fragments of the phenomena grouped under that name. We can track quantitative changes when we agree on standards for measuring the economy. But there is little agreement on how to

Public Spheres

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analyze a process such as democratization, because it involves translating concepts that are both theoretical and descriptive. While we can agree on the theoretical meaning of democracy or democratization, the substantive meaning of key components such as elections may vary widely from one place to another.

Elections in societies that recently emerged from colonial rule or dictatorship are not the same as elections in nations where parliamentary rule has long existed. Two centuries or more of social reforms preceded the changes that led to modern politics in the West, from privatizing religion to regulating labor and living conditions. But elsewhere political change often came first, with the arrival of colonial governments; social reforms came later, if at all.

The use of general concepts that ignore situational differences is always risky. Furthermore, historical experience is witnessed and stored in regional and linguistic expressions, much of whose meaning is lost when integrated into more general formulations.

We can think about how concepts gain clarity through historical specificity by considering

an important example: the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's formulation of the concept of a bourgeois public sphere. In his 1962 book introducing the idea, Habermas suggested that the mutually reinforcing expansion of commercial media and capitalist markets permitted the emergence of popular arenas of political discourse. The bourgeois public sphere, in his account, was a space of association and free exchange that accompanied capitalist economic growth across Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, located outside the state and acting as a check on it. The expansion of a market for books and periodicals, and of spaces for unmonitored conversation among educated citizens, was crucial to this public sphere. In other words, the European public sphere was social before it was political.

In colonial contexts, however, the opposite was the case. In India, colonial rule initiated a public sphere that grew out of the Mughal court but sought both to include a few privileged natives and to secure the acclamation of a wider audience. Over time, this provoked indigenous exchanges between educated and uneducated classes, both having limited access to technologies of communication. Anticolonial politics led educated classes to engage in popular mobilization against British rule, creating social exchanges with peasants and workers that would gain symbolic substance over time. In this context, the bourgeois public sphere had to be repurposed by complementing rational criticism with affect and image, and amending universal concepts with regional and local nuances.

THE RIGHT TO POLITICS

For a country of its size and impoverishment, India is unique within the global South in

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the durability and inclusivity of its democratic system. It has retained an electoral democracy for decades and managed peaceful transitions in government. There are many reasons for this achievement. Prominent among them are a liberal constitution and the establishment of universal suffrage at the very outset of independence. Together, these factors ensured that the right to have political rights—in other words, the right to politics—could trump any rules, formal or informal, governing political activity itself.

Indians have time and again defended the right to politics against rules constraining political behavior, in what became a countrywide tradition during the period of colonial rule. When nationalist leaders took over after independence, they had every intention of putting an end to the disorderliness of popular practices of protest. As it turned out, that was not possible.

A remark made to me in 2011 by a Mumbai taxi driver explaining an impending strike by drivers protesting a government regulation illustrates the relationship between citizens and government in India: *"Agar hum bagawat nahin karte, to sarkar apna man maani karte."* (If we do not rebel, the government will do whatever it wants.)

Existing grievance procedures are too often ignored or inadequate, so strikes and other forms of civil disturbance have become the most reliable means of advancing a cause. Public infrastructure can be made to serve political ends in situations where actions speak louder than words. Streets may become protest venues; machinery and buildings might be damaged or otherwise turned into devices signaling disaffection. If established channels of communication cannot accommodate them, people may use available public technologies and services to get their message across.

For instance, the Jats, a dominant caste in the northern state of Haryana, have recently demanded "backward caste" status to gain access to education and jobs. In February, to draw attention to their demands, they damaged a canal supplying 60 percent of New Delhi's water. The government, opting for a pragmatic response, was forced to bring the army out to repair the canal while making concessions to the Jats.

In many such cases, the government appears to operate like a combatant in the public arena, assessing protests not on their merits but in terms of the threat they seem to pose. The government can always crush a demonstration if it wants to, but the effort and consequences must be weighed against the cost of solving the problem instead. It is through such calculations that an overburdened state maintains and even incrementally advances democracy in a poor country. Political rights are not enjoyed in the abstract; they are tested and fought over. This ensures a democratic process that is livelier and more informative outside Parliament than inside its halls.

India's public sphere features varieties of populism, where interest and identity serve to mobilize people in combinations that are hard to anticipate. Sometimes an organized show of strength achieves its aim. In other cases, a seemingly isolated exchange, insult, or injury can turn into a dispute over caste, class, or something else; as if, spontaneously, a large crowd is summoned to join a confrontation that initially appeared to involve only two individuals. Rumor and superstition may propel campaigns that spread through print and more modern channels, including Twitter and text messages; not only the quality of debate but also the quantity of debaters can help determine the outcome. This public sphere is contemporary in its technological basis, yet it is dominated by crowds rather than individuals, often agitating over issues that appear to be traditional rather than modern.

COLONIAL CODES

A brief discussion of colonial history is indispensable to understanding how this combination of features began to take shape. India's public sphere was qualified by the fact of colonial rule, which was aimed at foiling, not fostering, inclusion. With formal political participation foreclosed, how were Indians who belonged to different classes and communities supposed to form a common idea of what a public was?

Nationalists built on and extended existing collective identities. They used a variety of techniques to communicate, including public performances and mass demonstrations. They made multilingual appeals to caste and religious identity, employing sounds (the voice, the drum, and the horn) as well as objects and images (homespun *khadi* cloth and printed pictures) to align audiences with a political agenda. The actual course of political mobilization, sometimes violent, often unparliamentary and unpredictable, determined which movements would endure. "Public" and "private" were fluid and shifting categories, depending on the situation.

We can identify at least four major elements that shaped the historical experience of the Indian public sphere. First, transparency was a virtue in India, as elsewhere, but surveillance and the dangers posed by sedition laws led to the proliferation of coded messages aimed at thwarting censors. Since these codes were designed to gain popular support, they could not be secret. Rather, codes were used to exploit fissures within the colonial public sphere and allow for deniability and doublespeak, drawing attention to the identity of the communicators and the context of communication at least as much as to the content of their messages. For example, images and slogans about what was effectively a new deity, "Mother India," were interpreted as religious or nationalist, depending on the context. This technique enabled nationalist mobilization while formally observing the colonial prohibition of political activity.

Second, although colonial administrators' aim in establishing a public sphere was to regulate opinion and unify a domain of argument, divisions within the colonial public sphere came to the fore: between colonizer and colonized, and among different sections of the colonized, who were divided by language, creed, and sect.

Media expansion enables more coordinated and extensive forms of exclusion than were previously imaginable.

Rather than exemplifying the rules of reasoned debate, nationalist uses of the colonial public sphere required highly context-sensitive cultural codes. The divergent interpretations of these codes, far from being a problem, were often crucial to the desired political outcomes, such as consolidating support for nationalism. The affective power of images and slogans may have compromised the rational quality of anticolonial arguments, but they enabled their audiences to mobilize, and to deepen the extent and quality of their political participation.

Third, if the public sphere was seen as an arena of free and equal exchange of ideas, and a means of defusing the potential for violence, the colonial public sphere was the exception that tested this claim. No shared conversation undergirded it. Force held it together, and periodically influenced outcomes of public debates. While colonial rule claimed to exercise force in the name of the law, anticolonial actors could justify violence as an extension of the political battles they were fighting, as a manifestation of

the popular will, and thus as auguring the emergence of a superior law.

Finally, religion became the rubric under which a range of identity claims began to be made in the growing public sphere, turning it into something quite different from what it had been in Western Europe. In the Indian setting religion would work both as a mobilizing force and as a violently divisive instrument of rule.

Enlightened Europeans associated religion with the *ancien régime*, and they assumed that it should be excluded from a modern public sphere and confined to the private realm. However, the British legacy in India complicated this stance. For example, the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny occurred in part because many Indian soldiers saw the British as imposing Christian practices on them, with callous disregard for native beliefs. The colonial response was spelled out in Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858, which formally brought India under British rule. Thereafter, the British vowed, they would not interfere in India's "ancient ways of worship," while in other ways they would try to treat imperial subjects equally.

SECULARISM SIDELINED

Religion became a surrogate category of political discourse, used in mobilizing recruits for the nationalist cause. By contrast, in the political arguments made for negotiating national independence, religion was usually treated as a background factor, or as one aspect of national identity rather than an overriding principle. The contradiction between negotiating strategy and mobilizing tactic came to a head with Partition in 1947, and the de facto separation of India along religious lines.

After independence, debates over the terms of national unity retreated to the margins. Religious conflict abated for a while, with Hindus having become an overwhelming majority, and Muslims, though still numerous, a minority in every state. Even in this context, the national government's policy of secularism was avowed only quietly. No attempt was made to translate the term, which few citizens understood in any case, beyond routine and enigmatic declarations that all Indians were to be regarded as kin, a statement printed as a stand-alone line on the pages of government publications such as school textbooks. Like

nationalism, secularism attracted little debate until the 1980s.

Prejudice against Muslims was in fact widespread, especially in northern India. A popular notion was that the breakup of the subcontinent was all "their" doing, and the Muslims who stayed sometimes became scapegoats. Since a disproportionate percentage of those who left for Pakistan came from the middle class, the remaining Muslims were poorer, less educated, and more vulnerable to discrimination. They were excluded from government employment at many levels, as the 2006 Sachar Committee Report showed.

When the ruling Congress party, which avowed secularism, began to publicly cultivate the Hindu vote after 1980, it was vulnerable to the opposition taunt that it saw Muslims as a vote bank while paying lip service to Hindus. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) adroitly demonstrated that it was more consistent in advancing the Hindu cause, while denouncing secularism as a failed stratagem rather than a genuinely successful national ideal. It proclaimed that real nationalism (understood as majoritarianism) would mean BJP rule.

The BJP move was opportunistic but it signaled a significant social and political shift, not mere electoral positioning. The governments headed by the Congress party had long promoted secularism and developmentalism as central to nation building, with economic growth as the central motif. Declaring both to be failures, Hindu nationalists proclaimed themselves champions of market-led growth, gaining the favor of big business and the urban middle classes, which were impatient with the austerity and tempo of state-led development. The rapid growth of mass media from the 1980s onward served to encourage this transfer of political loyalties in various ways. With its culture of self-promotion, the media showcased the success of market reforms.

Previously insignificant, the media industry became a politically prominent actor by the late 1980s, and today few would deny that it dominates the national landscape. The developmental state planned and built the communications infrastructure, but the credit now goes to the private sector, apparently with the government's agreement. Most people take it for granted that a media system conceived to advance state development

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became its living reproof, and boosted cultural nationalism while embracing market globalization.

TECHNOLOGIES OF PERSUASION

During the Cold War, India was a major focus of US foreign policy on account of its size and proximity to the communist world. Promoting global communications became a significant concern of the United States after World War II, not only as a way of asserting its role as leader of the free world, but also in response to its anxiety about Soviet influence. Spreading media technologies in neutral and nonaligned countries was seen as a way to counteract the threat of communist ideology. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles remarked in 1946 that if he were to be granted only one agenda item, it would be the free flow of information. This was a gamble at the time, since it was not certain how these technologies would be used.

Washington encouraged the Indian government to invest in communications as a technology of state building and as a form of political insurance, arguing that control over electronic media could prevent political opinion from shifting significantly. This view reflected the consensus of communications scholars in the United States, based on intensive wartime and postwar research on media effects. The first set of television broadcasts to Indian villages (2,400 of them), which extended over a year in 1975–76, was made possible by the loan of a satellite from the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration. American experts oversaw the exercise. Its success led the Indian government to set up its own ground-based wireless transmission system, which relied on signals from satellites that the United States continued to provide for several years.

Print media had constituted one kind of public domain; the rapid expansion of electronic media, with its compression of space and time across rural and urban areas, and literate and illiterate classes, created a wholly different one. While rumor, image, and song had been potent tools of mobilization in the colonial period, television made it possible to summon the past into the present. The Hindu mythology presented in tele-serial format became part of the everyday furniture of

people's minds. Television was designed to move the country forward, but for large sections of the audience that were ambivalent about what the future might bring, it made the ways of the past more appealing. Before long, the political arena took notice.

EPIC SHIFT

In 1985, a Muslim woman who sued her divorced husband for maintenance prevailed in the Indian Supreme Court, but Parliament soon reversed the judgment under pressure from Muslim clerics. The reversal became a cause for Hindu nationalists, who protested that the ruling Congress party was flouting the law to cultivate the Muslim vote—an example of hypocritical Congress secularism in practice. In the wake of these protests, Hindu nationalist mobilization, for the first time in the post-independence period, began to redefine faith and ritual in political terms. The Congress party had also started to shore up its electoral base with overt appeals to the Hindu vote, but on this terrain the opposition had the advantage.

The Congress party's shift to religious and cultural forms of appeal went together with a retreat from economic planning and heavy regulation of private business activity. As the Indian economy began to rise above its stubbornly slow "Hindu rate of growth" (3 to 3.5 percent per year) in the early 1980s, the government's notorious regulatory regime, the "license-permit raj," began to be relaxed in favor of market initiatives.

Print and television expansion was a part of this process and helped reinforce it. Indian-language media grew exponentially, making the minority status of English more evident. Soon, media growth came to be treated as a barometer for India's economic reforms, while media outlets adopted a promotional tone in favor of the reforms. The urban middle classes were the principal audience and also formed the bulk of the consuming population. In a virtuous cycle, the media celebrated the flattering self-image of the consuming classes, whose interest in media then increased.

It was the public broadcaster Doordarshan—under Congress rule—that oversaw the renovation of the mythological genre, long dismissed as moribund, and helped bring to the surface a Hindu constituency that had seldom been an overt political actor since independence. The *Ramayan* epic tele-series, produced and directed by Ramanand Sagar, established the state-owned television system as a monopoly medium across north and south India despite its reliance on the Hindi language, which was understood by less than half the population. (The epic, known to every Indian language, tells of a lost golden age, Ram Rajya, which resonates across Hinduism's many divisions, and which Gandhi had evoked during his anticolonial campaign.) The audience doubled in a few months. City streets and marketplaces were empty during every broadcast; it was not wise to schedule a public event for that time, as BJP leaders found out when no one turned up for a party conclave held on a Sunday morning as an episode aired.

Audiences could understand the *Ramayan* as a benign tale of a bygone age, as a devotional lesson, or as a way of talking about the kind of leadership a society needed. Meanwhile, many English-educated elites suddenly became conscious that what they had considered their rightful leadership role was slipping away, replaced by cultural marginality. This division between the elite and the majority, which had long been articulated by the Indian-language intelligentsia, came to the surface with the serial's popularity.

The *Ramayan* functioned not only as myth and history. It also appeared to some as a manifesto to restore pride in Hindu civilization and to ensure that Hindus were once again at the center of the polity. Where reality ended and illusion began was hard to say. With the numerous tele-epics that appeared following the *Ramayan*'s success, media and politics began to merge into each other. As the BJP leader L.K. Advani remarked in a 1993 interview, "For the purpose of securing the non-committed vote, you must, at least, create an illusion that you are likely to come to power."

Previously, the future had been the subject of state planning. In the 1990s, it was captured by the projections of market reforms and the dreams of televised Hindu myths. Electoral battles had earlier centered on mobilizing the rural poor, who constituted the majority of the electorate. Now the growing urban middle classes became increasingly important with the rise of the media, and helped redefine the style of electioneering. Political campaigns came to resemble personality-centered marketing operations.

Although the Congress had laid the groundwork for this shift, the BJP reaped the rewards. After the landslide victory of Narendra Modi and the BJP in the May 2014 elections, the advertising

expert Piyush Pandey of the US firm Ogilvy & Mather, who had managed the last 50 days of the campaign, explained that Modi was "a fantastic product." Even historic election results in the world's largest democracy now seem to promise individual lifestyle changes rather than a collective future and a better world.

AGGRESSIVE ATTITUDES

Ironically, a proliferating mediascape has produced a public sphere that appears more constrained and diminished the world over, making it all the harder to convert private opinions into meaningful political action. In India too, while the durability of the democratic process is encouraging, there is evidence of a narrowing political consensus, and more aggressive attitudes toward minorities and dissidents of all varieties. A series of Hindu nationalist campaigns has sought to bolster this new social consensus, while electoral outcomes demonstrate at best volatile support for their cause.

The BJP's 2014 victory suggests that Hindus have finally chosen a party based on majority identity, nearly 70 years after independence. As seen in many other countries over the past several years, a colonial inheritance of secular governance has devolved, in part through electoral democracy, into majoritarianism. Hindu assertion, like other forms of contemporary political chauvinism, is deeply connected with structural transformation and new modes of social aspiration. It reflects a changing alignment of upwardly mobile and dominant classes. It also points to a reaction against the erstwhile paradigm of postcolonial development, a paradigm that buckled under the pressures it was subject to.

As with the Congress in the past, the BJP regularly experiences defeat in state and local elections, confounding forecasts. Poor and marginalized voters continue to participate disproportionately in the electoral process: They can change the outcome of an election when they vote, and they know it. However, there are some basic points about this emergent public sphere that are distinctive and new.

Development is unexpectedly back on the agenda, albeit through public-private partnerships rather than state initiative. The new model is championed by Modi, a pro-business politician

English-educated elites suddenly became conscious that they were slipping into cultural marginality.

with an unusually aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda. Neither characteristic has typically been seen as particularly pro-development. But coded exchanges and double entendres played an early and formative role in the Indian public sphere, from calls for cow protection serving to rally anticolonial support, to the worship of Mother India providing a made-up religious surrogate for a brand-new nationalist cause. Transparent communication is not necessarily offered by leaders or expected by voters. Market-led plans for growth are described in high-minded terms and evoke nostalgia for a strong state, when in fact private businesses direct key aspects of most government initiatives.

There are also new forms of exclusion. Despite having an absolute majority of seats in Parliament, the first held by any ruling party in over 30 years, the BJP does not have a single Muslim member in the legislature's elected house, the Lok Sabha. No previous party has come to power while excluding Muslims so completely. Meanwhile the situation of Muslims has steadily worsened over the past three decades. During this time, they have replaced the Dalits (formerly called "untouchables," now officially known as "Scheduled Castes") as the most deprived community in India. Parochial anti-Islamic prejudice now appears to dovetail with global trends, and Muslims can easily be accused of anti-national and terrorist behavior.

A tentative hypothesis to explain these changes is that Indian society is democratizing, but in a "Hindu" way. If, as the independence-era Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar argued, Hindu unity was constituted by caste Hindus' shared aversion toward the former "untouchable" castes, electoral democracy has introduced a new dynamic into this process. The new basis for Hindu unification is the exclusion of Muslims, alongside the formal inclusion of Dalits. The register of exclusion shifts in the process, from untouchability to invisibility. Media expansion enables more coordinated and extensive forms of exclusion than were previously imaginable, making it easier than ever to blanket the nation with Hindu-centric imagery while ignoring Muslims altogether. Political dynamics have both anticipated this development and furthered it.

To be "Hindu" in this context is an artifact of publicity rather than an expression of ancient mores. It is no surprise that a senior BJP leader, Arun Jaitley, has stated that Hindu nationalism is an opportunistic issue for the party, a "talking point" rather than a core ideology. The electoral process has sanctioned a new language of political theology for the BJP.

In his Madison Square Garden speech in New York in September 2014, Modi referred to the people as sovereign and their verdict as divine. He declared, "*Janata Jan Janardhan,*" a phrase suggesting that the will of the people prevails over the world. But *Janardhan* is not a secular term for "ruler"; it refers to the Hindu god Lord Krishna. In this worldview, electoral success provides the supreme redemption, negating merely juridical verdicts. It implies a divine will at work, or the manifestation of a divine power in the figure of the elected ruler, who is like a king but sanctified by a formal democratic process.

SPHERE OF SPECTACLE

As concepts travel, they stretch and transform. They are also affected by technological change. The public sphere of debate and discussion predicated on transparency has given way to a public sphere of image and spectacle. And the accelerated circulation of opinions and images has produced secrecy and surveillance, together with spectacular bursts of violence every now and again.

Technological growth has been so rapid over the past century and a half, and social identification with technology so intense, that it has taken over historical understanding. Although the vast majority of the world first encountered media technologies through colonial absolutism rather than liberal democracy, the framework of a communications revolution is often applied unreflectively. It is as though the fable of a reading public of educated gentlemen able to change their government is expected to be reenacted in country after country. This has failed to happen, of course, but so far that has made little difference to such optimistic assumptions, since hopes for a better future tend to become identified with technology.

Given recent disclosures concerning the expansion of state surveillance by means of information technology, however, we can recognize absolutist power at work everywhere, not just in the distant past or in non-Western countries. For all of its problems, the Indian public sphere has a long history of engaging with absolutist power; indeed, its very existence is proof of the limits of such power.

The attempt to consolidate the Hindu religious community has politicized the caste-based terms of its unification. It is now recognized that Hindu majoritarianism is led by an upper-caste minority; to that extent, it persists at the pleasure of lower castes, which know well that they are in the majority. Beset as it is by flaws, Indian democracy is here to stay. ∎