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Perspectives on Ethnic Conflict in Indian Politics [1]

GURHARPAL SINGH

Few images have better portrayed Indian society as beset by ethnic conflict as the physical destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodyha in December 1992. The violence which accompanied the destruction became an international event, evoking parallels with the partition of India. Dramatic though these events were, their symbolism disguises an obvious fact: that Indian politics in the last decade have become increasingly besieged by ethnic conflicts. These conflicts have ranged from being regionally based in peripheral states such as Kashmir, Punjab and Assam, to heartland areas of the Hindi-belt. Non-territorial forms of ethnic mobilisation against affirmative action by higher castes have also been prominent. In short India, like most multi-national states, is experiencing an ethnic revival. Ethnic conflicts which previously occupied a marginalised space in Indian politics have now become embedded in its core. The future of Indian democracy in the short and medium terms seems largely contingent on its ability to manage, contain and, if possible, resolve these conflicts.

This paper seeks to review the main perspectives which predominate in the understanding of contemporary ethnic conflicts in Indian politics. Broadly they fall into three schools of thought: instrumentalist, primordialist and state-revisionists.[2] These perspectives are neither exclusive nor exhaustive but are distinguished by their claims to inform policy formation and provide workable solutions to current disputes.

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1 I am grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for its financial support of research on which this article is based.

2 W.A. Douglass, ‚A Critique of Recent Trends in the Analysis of Ethnonationalism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 192-206, has drawn attention to the instrumentalism-primordialism as providing the main analytical distinction in the literature on ethnic studies. This distinction has been regularly employed by South Asian specialists since the 1970s, see David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp, *Political Identity in South Asia* (London: Curzon, 1979). For a recent statement of the position see U. Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990). The state-revisionist perspective reflects the indigenous tradition identified with neo-Gandhism and post-modernist critiques of the Indian state.

1. Instrumentalism

Despite the over-powering images of India as ethnically conflict-ridden society, there is a remarkable degree of official and academic consensus which suggests that ethnicity in Indian politics is best understood in instrumental terms.[3] Instrumentalists maintain that ethnic identities in India are not cultural givens but have been shaped and reshaped on a regular basis. For instrumentalist ,ethnicity is an exercise in boundary maintenance requiring a praxis: ethnic identity and group boundaries may be defended, penetrated or ignored depending upon situational exigencies'.[4] For some instrumentalist the conditions of Indian political life ensure a regular success of this exercise; for others, it is at least partially qualified by the ,pool of symbols' or the level of political organisation available to an ethnic group.[5] These differences of emphasis not withstanding the underlying approach to ethnicity, as relatively malleable, is accepted by both orientations and underscored by their analyses of Indian politics.

According to the instrumentalist school Indian politics are characterised by group pluralism. The state is seen essentially as an arena for group conflicts where no single group predominates.[6] Ethnically, India is said to comprise a ,relatively even gradation of groups in importance, from several large ones and no sharp cut-off points'.[7] This view has led some scholars to conclude that ,ethnic configuration in terms of politically dominant and subordinate groups at the central level becomes virtually impossible'. But the same, however, does not necessarily pertain at the state (provincial level) where the ,dominance of the Centre may not always be spelt out in ethnic terms (but) the group perceiving itself discriminated against and subordinated may project its demands vis-a-vis the Centre in ethnic terms'.[8]

Group pluralism in Indian politics has been further underpinned by ethnic segmentation. India has ordinarily been described as a segmented society in ,which each language, tribal, or religious group contains within itself a complete societal division of labour and also contains internal caste groups which may or may not be successfully integrated into the broader

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3 See Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

4 Douglas, *op.cit.*, p. 192

5 See Paul R. Brass, in Taylor and Yapp, *op.cit.*, pp. 62-68.

6 For a recent statement of this position see L.I Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987)

7 Brass, (1974), p. 11.

8 Phadnis (1990), p. 45.

ethnic structure'.[9] Segmentation has had two consequences for politics. First, it has encouraged the vertical articulation of ethnicity, thereby facilitating elite autonomy for possible consociation and coalition building. The ability of elites to select symbols of ethnicity at critical junctures in order to reconstruct ethnic identities has been identified as a crucial variable in shaping ethnic boundaries. Second, segmentation is often cut-across by caste and other loyalties which have enabled the state (and other ethnic groups) to compete for ethnic ties. In brief, the cultural autonomy of ethnic groups has enabled them to be better influenced and controlled by their political elites while structural differentiation within them has often frustrated horizontal mobilisation.

The instrumentalist perspective is also supported by the relative absence of cumulative cleavages reinforcing ethnicity. India, it has been noted, is the most ethnically diverse society in the world. The complex stratification of caste unique to it is also overlaid with equally complex identities of language, religion and region that straddle imprecise geographical boundaries. These cross-cutting cleavages have both diluted the force of ethnicity and frustrated the emergence of cumulative cleavages.[10] Even in cases where there appears to be prima facie evidence of cumulative cleavages (e.g. Sikhs in Punjab) experience suggests that ethnic groups have systematically emphasised the politically most effective dimension of ethnicity, one capable of bringing the other cleavages into congruence.[11]

The instrumentalist interpretation is given further credence by the policies followed by the Indian state on ethnic issues since 1947. Instrumentalists argue that not only the nature of ethnicity in Indian society orientates it towards construction and reconstruction, but its articulation within the Indian political system has also encouraged this process. In dealing with ethnicity in politics the India state has very much been influenced by an analytical distinction between benign and malign forms.[12] The benign view has included its legitimate recognition within the framework of democratic, secular and federal political system committed to a socially distributive philosophy. The commitment of the Indian National Congress (INC) to the linguistic reorganisation of India's provinces pre-dates independence. Most states, with the notable exception of Punjab, had been linguistically reorganised by 1965. Although substantial linguistic mi-

9 Brass (1974), p. 12.

10 See Phadnis (1990).

11 See Brass (1974).

12 For an examination of the distinction, see John Rex, *Race and Ethnicity* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

norities persisted after reorganisation, this has not been seen to justify further division of existing states. In some states, however, the protective category of tribal area is recognised.[13]

In addition to linguistic recognition of ethnicity, the constitution empowered the executive to institute forms of affirmative action for disadvantaged groups. Article 15(4) and 335 of the constitution allow the Union government to make affirmative action provisions in the field of public sector employment and political representation in legislative assemblies. These articles were the products of a socially distributive philosophy espoused by the INC and the pre-independence compromise in which the leadership of the untouchable castes agreed to forego separate electorates under the colonial constitution for political reservation after independence. Since 1950 this provision has been extended to Schedule Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs). At the provincial level some state governments have extended the range of affirmative action beyond the SCs and STs to Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The decision of the V.P. Singh-led National Front union government in 1990 to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission – that affirmative action provision in employment be extended to OBCs who constitute approximately 50 per cent of the total population – led to a nation wide agitation by the SCs and OBCs and those opposed to the increase in affirmative action quotas.[14]

In contrast to the benign view of ethnicity the Indian state has most emphatically illegalised its allegedly malign forms. Regional movements that demand secession from the Indian Union are suppressed with force if necessary. A constitutional amendment introduced in 1963 empowers the Government of India to suppress secessionist demands by force. This policy has been most apparent against the secessionist movements in the north-eastern states of Nagaland and Assam and, more recently, in Kashmir and Punjab. In the latter a massive use of armed force led to the army action in the Golden Temple.[15] Political organisations and militant groups campaigning for independent states of Kashmir and Punjab are proscribed. In the case of these two states a ruthless anti-terrorist campaign has been waged. In Punjab alone over 25,000 people have died in ethnic or

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13 In addition to tribal areas, article 370 of the Indian constitution guarantees special status for Kashmir. This article is both a recognition of Kashmir's distinctiveness and an acknowledgement of the unique conditions under which the province acceded to India.

14 See D. Kumar, ‚The Affirmative Action Debate in India', *Asian Survey,* vol 32, no. 3, pp. 290-302.

15 See Gurharpal Singh, ‚Understanding the "Punjab Problem"', *Asian Survey,* vol. 27, no. 12, pp. 1268-1272.

ethnic-related violence since 1984. [16] The response of successive Union governments has been to avoid negotiations with militant secessionists unless they are first prepared to accept the legitimacy of the Indian Union and to join the ‚mainstream'.

Equally, religiously based movements that lay claim to political recognition have also been opposed by Union governments. The rationale for this policy is to be found in the secular foundations of the Indian Union and its birth amidst the religious violence of the partition. Although the Indian form of secularism is peculiar, based on *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal treatment of all religions), in practice, instrumentalists have argued, it has not been too dissimilar from the conventional Eurocentric secular tradition. The logic of this policy has been to oppose religious movements that have sought the fulfilment of political demands under the disguise of ‚accepted currency' – linguistic, cultural and territorial demands. Thus after partition, the campaign for a Punjabi-speaking province, led by the Sikh political party, Akali Dal, was firmly resisted by Nehru on the grounds that it was a movement for a political recognition of a religious demand. Only after the Akali Dal reframed its proposal in *linguistic* rather than *religious* terms was the Punjabi-speaking province created in 1966.

Finally, in terms of its refereeing role the Indian state has been prepared to negotiate with ethnic group in conflict provided they have genuine mass support. Political concession have rarely been conceded on capricious grounds. Mass mobilisation of support is often a trigger for the process of negotiations to begin. Agreement of ethnic groups in conflict, however (e.g. over linguistic reorganisation), is held to be a prerequisite of recognition of legitimate demands.

The distinction between benign and malign ethnicity was clearly maintained and followed during Nehru's leadership of the INC (1946-64). Nehru is credited with having created the ‚Congress System' – a dominant one-party system in which the INC combined the function of political development with political competition by espousing a socialist ideology, adopting secular leadership, and allowing considerable autonomy to state units. Naturally, the ‚Congress System' incorporated elements of both ‚domination and dissent' and in some ethnically plural states, like Punjab, the INC often resembled an intra-consociational coalition, vertically organising and accommodating hostile ethnic groups. The political attraction of the INC combined with universal suffrage and the structural differentiation within most ethnic groups introduced a form of corrosive political participation which, it was hoped in time, would temper malign forms of

16 G. Singh, ‚Punjab Elections 1992: Breakthrough or Breakdown?', *Asian Survey,* vol. 32, no. 11, pp. 988-999.

cohesive ethnicity. In the most celebrated case study, the formation of a Punjabi-speaking state, Nehru and his supporters were able steer the original movement away from ethno-religious orientation towards ethno-linguisticism.

With the election of Mrs Gandhi to the INC leadership in 1965 the ‚Congress System' and the Nehruvian guidelines for ethnic conflict management were soon undermined. Mrs Gandhi, in her quest for absolute control of the INC destroyed the ‚Congress System' and, after 1971, power became increasingly centralised in New Delhi, reflected above all by the imposition of the emergency (1975-77) and the reconstruction of the INC as Congress-I (Indira). Following Mrs. Gandhi's return to office (1980), the process of centralisation was accelerated, with authority within the Congress-I flowing from the Centre and the personality of Mrs. Gandhi rather than the provinces or the party machine. Opposition state governments were regularly destabilised through the arbitrary imposition of President's Rule (direct rule form Delhi).[17] Congress-I Chief Ministers in the states held their posts as a matter of loyalty to Mrs. Gandhi; and recalcitrant Chief Ministers were circumvented by the frequent promotion of Congress dissidents. Under Mrs. Gandhi, instrumentalists argue, the analytical distinction between benign and malign ethnicity was blurred. In fact the traditional relationship which the INC had enjoyed with the ethnic minorities was ruptured. Towards the end of her last administration Mrs. Gandhi courted Hindu revivalism as a new hegemonising ideology for the Congress-I. Mrs Gandhi, it is contended, first inflamed passions among the ethnic minorities and then put them to the sword. In sum, insist instrumentalists, explanations for the rise of ethnic conflicts in India are to be found in the policies and personality of Mrs Gandhi who systematically dismantled the framework for ethnic conflict management established by her father.[18]

The succession of Mrs Gandhi by her son Rajiv did not mark a fundamental departure in policy. After promising a return to Nehruvian guidelines Rajiv resorted to the tried methods of his mother. His succession by the National Front coalition and the Rao Congress-I government also implicity placated Hindu revivalism while simultaneously promoting hyper-

17 Article 356 of the Indian constitution empowers the Union government to take over the administration of a state and declare President's Rule. Although envisaged as a residual power of last resort, Article 356 has been used 65 times by March 1982. Its most recent application was the dismissal of four state administrations led by the Bharitya Janata Party after the Ayodhya incident. The frequency with which this article is applied in undermining state governments is often determined less by constitutional considerations than the political calculations of the party in power in New Delhi.

18 See Paul R, Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991).

instrumentalism among the peripheral ethnic movements in Kashmir, Assam and Punjab.[19] Ironically, the one Nehruvian guideline on which most national political parties concur and, in fact stress, is that secessionist movements, especially led by minority ethnic groups in India's peripheral states, should be suppressed by force whatever the consequences. It remains to be seen whether in the post-Ayodyha period the rhetoric of secularism will mark a fundamental reassessment of policy or simply disguises the statecraft of crisis management.

Although instrumentalists accounts emphasise the primacy of the political in understanding ethnic conflict in India, they do acknowledge the significance of social change as a contributory cause. Since the 1980s, strain-theory versions of modernisation theory have cautioned against the potential dangers of accelerated modernisation in the Indian context. A selected application of this approach has maintained that in some regions, for example Punjab, there is already the appearance of mass society: face-to-face communities have disintegrated; urbanisation, consumerism and mass literacy have become inflated political expectations; ethnic identities have become firmer emblems of occupational competition; rootlessness, alienation and graduate unemployment have nurtured messianic tendencies; and, above all, a revolution has taken place in communications, especially political communications with the development of the modern media.[20]

Similar developments have been detected in other parts of India. The process of modernisation, it is suggested, is creating a ‚new India' – an India that is speaking to itself in a vernacular idiom in the process of undergoing rapid economic, social and communications transformations. In this change modernisation strains are finding natural tributaries in religious, regional, caste and tribal identities. But if modernisation is transforming and redefining these identities by politicising them, the outcome is as much the result of political choice as social change. The strains of modernisation have created instrumentalist opportunities for ethnic political entrepreneurs but there is no logical reason why these should lead to ethnic conflict. Responsible political leadership at the Union level together with new political institutions could accommodate and better regulate social change.[21]

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19 Gurharpal Singh, ‚Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case Study of Punjab', in John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary eds., *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 84-105.

20 Robin Jeffrey, *What's Happening to India?* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

21 *Ibid.*

Instrumentalist solutions for managing contemporary ethnic conflicts in India therefore privilege the reconstruction of political ideals and structures that were relatively successful in the Nehruvian period. First among these is the demand for reaffirmation of the distinction between benign and malign ethnicity. Legitimate ethnic demands, whether territorial or group based, it is argued, ought to be recognised. Many of these demands had arisen in response to the centralising tendencies unleashed by Mrs. Gandhi's government. A key feature of territorially based ethnic movements (Punjab, Assam and Kashmir) is for reworking the Union-state relations in favour of the latter. Such a revision could accommodate most of the political thrust of peripheral and heartland movements, even perhaps the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Mrs. Gandhi and her successors' failure to address the legitimate concerns of regional ethnic movements have emboldened some of them to eschew ‚New Federalism' for confederalism or outright secession.

Second, in extending the argument that competitive political democracy is the ultimate antidote to ethnic solidarity, a key demand of instrumentalists is for democratic regeneration, an Indian equivalent of glasnost. Democracy it is suggested has been a powerful factor in limiting the intensity of ethnic conflicts in India. The increasing application of political closure, however, especially in the peripheral regions, has encouraged primordialist tendencies. Arguably there are sound reasons for the suspension of democratic processes where there is a distinct possibility that they would intensify ethnic conflict. But the converse is also valid, and in the case of Punjab, Kashmir and Assam the suspension of democratic processes through the imposition of direct rule from New Delhi has in fact intensified ethnic cohesion.[22] But the instrumentalist case for democratic regeneration goes beyond Centre-state relations to calls for extending participation and involvement at the state, district, and local levels. Nehruvian democracy, it is alleged, was founded on developmentalist model with the INC as an ‚Aristotelian party' guiding and nurturing the growth of a participatory political system. After Nehru the elitist foundations of this settlement were corrupted in the drive towards centralisation. Consequently, what is required is a profound reformulation of state structures as a basis of democratic regeneration.[23] Finally, the instrumentalist perspective also highlights the need to democratise and regenerate political institutions, especially political parties. Many scholars have com-

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22 See Gurharpal Singh, ‚The Punjab problem in the 1990s: A Post-1984 Assessment', *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics,* vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 175-191.

23 This view is systematically developed in Rajni Kothari, *State Against Democracy* (New Delhi: South Asia, 1987).

mented on the decay and degeneration of the Nehruvian INC into the Congress-I. Opinions differ as to whether a centrist and accomodationist Nehruvian INC can be recreated or whether a new consociational order may emerge from the pillarisation of the Congress-I. Both views, however, concur that political parties ought to better reflect social change and accommodate new political movements – ecological, feminist, peasant-based – that have posted a challenge to established parties and whose support base cuts across ethnic lines.[24]

2. Primordialism

For primordialists the significance of ethnicity in Indian politics is to be found in its continued salience. For this school of thought ,every person carries with him through his life "attachments" derived from places of birth, kinship, relationships, religion, language, and social practice that are "natural" for him, "spiritual" in character, and provide the basis of "affinity" with other people from the same background. These "attachments" constitute the "givens" of human condition and are "rooted in the non-rational foundations of personality"'.[25] In India the variety and complexity of "attachments", it is argued, has proved an enduring source of political affiliation and mobilisation. Although some primordialists adopt the extreme perspective that ethnic identities are immutable, others recognise the role of political and social factors in influencing the basic components of ethnicity.[26] Both tendencies acknowledge another distinction: namely the difference between minority and majority communities in India.

The most articulate accounts of the primordialist approaches are to be found in the analyses of India's religious, linguistic and caste minorities (Muslims, Sikhs, Schedule Castes). Primordialists contend that Muslims in India are not only a religious minority, but the social, political and historical experience of Muslims orientates them towards a form of a distinct cultural community. Muslim separatism in the past has been misunderstood as a form of interest-based movement, devoid of cultural sense of community defined by Islam. The Pakistan movement, it has been persuasively argued, was very much actuated by the sense of distinct community that shared a common historical experience and the individuality of Islam.

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24 See Jeffrey (1986).

25 Brass (1979), pp. 69-70.

26 Francis Robinson, ,Islam and Muslim Separatism', in Taylor and Yapp (1979), pp. 77-112.

Indeed, Muslim elites then and today failed to establish politics as an independent realm, an arena separate from religion. They were very much hemmed in by the cultural and historical symbols at their disposal, the religious and political ideas of Islam, the determination to defend Muslim interests, and the need to do so in the face of increasingly assertive Hindu revivalism.[27]

In post-independence India the Muslim sense of a distinct community has persisted, being sustained by religious, cultural and political institutions. Despite the internal gradations among India's Muslims – language, region, sect – there is an overarching identity of interest, regularly mobilised on issues of communal importance. The Indian state, moreover, has implicity contributed to this by allowing for the autonomy of Muslim personal sphere in recognising the separateness of Muslim Personal Law. Interestingly, the sequence of events which climaxed in Ayodhya began in 1986, when in response to a Supreme Court decision that infringed Muslim Personal Law and led to an outcry among Muslim organisations, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, allowed the Ayodhya dispute to be reopened as a quid pro quo to appease Hindu communal sentiment.[28] In this context, the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya was not just an act of vandalism: it was a clash of two nations.

Like Islam Sikhism does not sustain a strong distinction between the political and religious. The salience of religious issues has been a constant source of mobilisation for the Sikh community in the twentieth century despite its minority status, internal factionalism, and the absence of structure elite predominance. Primordialist accounts have highlighted the apparent disjunction between Sikh ideals and the realities of Sikh politics[29]; a disjunction painfully and forcefully brought to the fore by the military action of the Indian Army on the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden temple. If the Indian state had been particularly adept at managing the Sikh ethnic question through instrumentalist means during the Nehruvian era, Sikh ethnicity, nevertheless, remained ,cool in the belly' only to emerge in its primordial form after 1984. Since 1984 sustained efforts by the Indian state to engineer a new instrumentalist settlement have failed to generate a counter instrumentalist legitimation among the Sikh community.[30]

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27 *Ibid.*, pp.106-107.

28 See Nicholas Nugent, *Rajiv Gandhi: A Son of a Dynasty* (London: BBC Publications, 1990).

29 A good account is to be found in Joyce Pettigrew ,Description of the Discrepancy Between Sikh Political Ideals and Sikh Political Practice', in M.J. Aronoff, ed., *Political Anthropology Yearbook I* (New York:Transaction books, 1980), pp. 152-192.

30 See Singh (1991).

Minority primordialist analyses, moreover, also interprets claims of the Indian state to be secular and multi-ethnic with a great deal of scepticism. Such assessments draw inspiration from the apparent cultural (as well as religious) homogeneity of Hinduism which often transcends linguistic and other barriers so that ‚Hindus "speak the same language" even when they do not speak the same language'.[31] Anslie T. Embree in a perceptive study of religion and nationalism in modern India has argued that after 1947 Hinduism became associated with national culture, so much so that it was equated with a status of a ‚civic religion'.[32] For others, Hinduism provides a form of pan-Indian ethnicity in which even Nehruvianism, was at best, a ‚defensive strategy against communal conflict rather than a charter for the secularisation of Indian society'. This strategy implicity accommodated Hindu religious interests because in the early 1950s Nehru initiated a pattern in which the ‚Indian state would respond positively to religious pressure, particularly those emanating from Hindu groups, but would keep a distance from communal parties and platforms'.[33] Moreover, the ethnic bases of the INC, it is suggested, are rooted in the revivalist Hinduism of the late 19th century; and its intolerance towards ethnic separatism, especially religious based ethno-separatism of minorities, is due to their history which stands in contradiction to the triumphalist trajectory of the Indian national movement. And if India's ethnic minorities have occasionally allied with the ‚secular INC', this should not be interpreted as an affirmative of their trust in the former. Rather the predicament of ethnic minorities in hegemonically Hindu India has encouraged a defensive instrumentalism where the protection of identity and community has been bartered for political support.[34]

The 1980s have also witnessed the growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) centred around the politics of Hindu revivalism. The BJP and its sister organisations attempts to project Hinduism as a cohesive ideological force. Since 1984 the BJP has grown from 2 seats in the Lok Sabha to 119 in 1991, thereby forming the main national opposition party to the Congress-I. In the period between November 1989 and June 1991, the party's share of the national vote increased from 11.5 per cent to 20 percent, while at the state level it formed ministries in four key states (Uttar

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31 The point is made by Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 109, n. 1.

32 See Anslie T. Embree, *Utopias in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

33 P.C. Upadhyaya, ‚The Politics of Indian Secularism', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 26, no. 4, pp. 815-853.

34 See Gokhale-Turner, ‚The Dalit Panthers and the Radicalisation of Untouchable', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 77-93.

Pardesh, Madhya Pardesh, Himachal Pardesh and Rajasthan) in the Hindi belt. Most recently the BJP has captured state power in Gujerat and, with its allies, Maharashtra.

The political programme of the BJP and its assocated organisations (VHP,RSS) is the aggresive advocacy of Hindu *Rashtra* (State) and *Hindutva* (Hindu cutlural values and ethos) that would entail a cultural and political revolution against Nehruvian ‚pseudo-secularism' – ‚pseudo-secular' because it proclaimed western secularism for Hindus while consolidating minority religious identities like the Muslims. Genuine secularism, according to the BJP, would avoid the western ideal and assert the primacy of Hinduism – a common shared "secular" value of all Indians – in which ‚all would be Hindus, whether Arya Samajist, Santana Dharmics, Mohammedans Hindus or Issa Hindus'. The destruction of the Babri Masjid was the start of this project because it was a ‚symbol of Hindu defeat and foreign domination' and therefore ‚had to be wiped out'.[35]

This development of majority primordialism has not only questioned the secular basis of the Nehruvian state but seeks to create an Hindu state, a state that would be in congruence with the overwhelming cultural force in Indian society. As an ideologue of this view has succinctly put it, ‚secularism in South Asia as a shared credo of life is impossible, as a basis of state action impractical, and as a blueprint for the future impotent. It is impossible as a credo of life because the great majority of the people of South Asia are in their own eyes active adherents of some religious faith'.[36]

Majority primordialist accounts of the establishment of Indian secularism range from the elitist to conspiratorial. The leadership of Nehru, it is alleged, forced through secular issues more through the influence of personality than a reflection of popular public opinion, either in or outside the INC. In fact even within the INC and its ‚pseudo-secularism' the voice of *Hindutva* was a consociational pillar which, though not hegemonic, was a powerful actor that was recognised by Nehru and his successors.[37] Only since the post-Mrs. Gandhi pillarisation of Congress-I and the increasing disjunction between its professed aims and actual practice has the ideological space opened up for Hindu revivalism to be projected forcefully. It

35 BJP Vice-President, *India Today*, 15 February, 1993.

36 T. N. Madan, ‚Secularism in its Place' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4., (November, 1987).

37 See Partha Ghosh, ‚Hindu Nationalism, the Politics of Nation-Building and Implications for Legitimacy of the State', paper presented at the International Colloquium on Legitimacy and Conflict in South Asia: External and Internal Challenges to Governance, Südasien-Institut, University of Heidleberg, 10-11 February, 1995.

is not coincidental that the relative demise of the Congress (INC and Congress-I) has been accompanied by the rise of the BJP.

Both minority and majority primordialist analyses advance relatively similar solutions for managing contemporary conflicts. Territorially based minorities have been at the forefront of demands form greater autonomy to separatism. Many see separatism as the only way to safeguard religious, cultural or linguistic individuality threatened by a resurgent Hinduism waging a Kulterkampf against distinctive minorities. This defensive reaction, increasingly identified as a war between cultures, is often located in four types of discrimination perceived by minorities: constitutional, economic, social, and religious. And if the mainspring for minority separatism derives from historic ethnies, their project is essentially modern: to create a congruence between political and cultural units.[38]

Similarly, the prescriptions of majority primordialist analysts is to abandon India's ‚pseudo-secularism' for full integration and assimilation of India's religious minorities into the Hindu cultural mainstream. The BJP, for example, is the most vociferous opponent of Article 370 of the Indian constitution which grants special status to Kashmir. Its solution to the Kashmir question is to integrate Kashmir into the Indian Union, both politically and culturally. Likewise, the same remedies are offered for the discontent of other minorities. Group rights guaranteed by the constitution – Muslim Personal Law and affirmative action programmes for the SCs and STs – should be removed in terms of the imperative of nation-building and cultural homogeneity. Where ethnic group boundaries between Hindus and non-Hindus are vague, as in the case of the Sikhs, the call is for emotional empathy with such groups coupled with systematic integration into the Hindu fold.[39]

The programme of majority primordialists is directed especially at India's Muslims who represent about 12 per cent of the total population. In particular they would be required to adhere to four conditions: they must ‚1) accept the centrality of Hinduism to Indian civilisation; 2) acknowledge key figures such as Ram as civilisational heros ...3) accept that Muslim rulers ... destroyed pillars of Hindu civilisation ... 4) make no claims for special privileges'.[40] Only these conditions, it is insisted, would promote *Ekya* (assimilation) and demonstrate Muslims as worthy citizens of a Hindu nation.

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38 See Singh (1987).

39 Balraj Madhok, *Punjab Problem: The Muslim Connection* (New Delhi: Hindu World Publications, 1985).

40 Ashutosh Varshney, ‚Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety', *Daedalus*, Summer, 1993, p. 231.

3. State Revisionist Perspective

Pessimism with both instrumentalist and primordialist schools of thought has generated a new debate on ethnicity in Indian politics. This school of thought has been described as ,state revisionists' and draws on a diffuse set of influences – discourse analysis, post-modernism, neo-Gandhism and cultural history. While the output of ,state revisionists' is varied and extremely heterogenous, they do agree on the need to radically reappraise the issue of ethnicity outside the conventional paradigms of modernist political science.[41]

For state revisionist the primary ethnic cleavages in India are religious and should be placed ,within India's indigenous tradition'.[42] In contrast, the state tradition of Nehru's India is fatally flawed because it draws its inspiration from a Euro-centric model in which the conduct of secularist forms of politics stands ill-at ease with a largely religious society. Under the Nehruvian state the interaction between state and society has generated defensive and ideologically religious reactions that seek to create primordial ideals in response to the zeal of secular policies. In so doing the post-1947 Indian state has undermined the tradition, self-correcting, dialectical relationship between the state and spiritual which has historically characterised Indian polity. Indeed, the modernist project of Nehru atrophied the indigenous relationship between the secular and the sacred. In an essentially religious society aggressive modernism has led to largely defensive religious reactions which in themselves have become the basis for obtaining political power.[43]

The state revisionist perspective views the state more in terms of functional categories rather than legal definitions. Stateness, the degree of statehood, is a matter of ,tradition', ,historical existence', ,shared collective memories'. Consequently, the solution to state loyalty and ethnic conflicts lies in heterogeneity rather than uniformity, difference rather that conformity, and diversity rather than homogeneity. Contemporary ethnic conflicts in India could be better managed, insist state revisionists, by varying the degree of accommodation between ethnicity (religious and non-religious) and the state, particularly at regional levels, without pursuing the goal of national uniformity. The failure of "defending a strong

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41 *Ibid.*

42 Subrata K. Mitra, ,Desecularising the State: Religion and Politics in India After Independence', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol 33, no. 4, pp. 755-777.

43 *Ibid*, pp. 244-247.

central government at all costs in Punjab and more recently Kashmir is enough to demonstrate the need for greater political accommodation of regional and religious interests. A modern secular state as a lowest common denominator of regional and religious differences can generate neither the strength nor the legitimacy adequate to the task. A sense of organic unity and political coherence in a regionally diverse state can be created through the better integration of the sacred and the secular sources of authority in India."[44]

The state revisionist perspective appears to overcome many of the difficulties encountered in the instrumentalist and primordialist analyses. By arguing for plurality and variegated stateness, it appears to be prepared to accommodate religious and non-religious forms of ethnicity.

The emphasis on ‚organic unity' would certainly contribute to the greater legitimation of the political system. Applied to minority ethnic movements, state revisionism would advocate their accommodation, and indeed, hegemonic assertion where they were the larger ethnic group. Thus state revisionism in Punjab and Kashmir would mean the political integration of Islam and Sikhism, even though it might be resented by significant minorities.

Similarly, state revisionists prescriptions for the majority would also have profound implications. Greater religious accommodation of minorities would also be accompanied by the political and ethnic integration of the majority into the state structure for underpinning cultural unity. Although caste, linguistic and cultural differences among Hindus would probably militate against the emergence of a ‚hegemonic majority', there would, nevertheless, be the ever present danger that majoritarianism could be sought to be redefined around the reconstruction of new religious traditions.[45]

Conclusion

In the last decade the relative weaknesses of the instrumentalist school in providing satisfactory explanations of contemporary ethnic conflicts has rekindled interest in primordialist analyses. The latter has found a receptive audience among India's minorities and, more recently, its majority. Yet despite this appeal, primordialism as a mode of analysis is, for the present, most fruitful in understanding cases of cumulative cleavages

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44 *Ibid.*

45 This, in a sense, could be argued is the project of the BJP.

(Punjab and Kashmir) though, since Ayodhya, its usefulness appears to be equally relevant in the case of the Hindu majority.

Despite these limitations instrumentalism still provides the main framework for understanding the causes and consequences of ethnic conflicts in India. It is clear that its attractiveness to India's minorities (and majority) might be of limited nature, especially during periods of heightened tensions. However, as transactional politics re-asserts itself, the tendency to withdraw into primordial closures may wane as the costs of such ethnic withdrawal outweigh the opportunities to bargain for political power. Ironically, as the post-Ayodhya events have demonstrated, the value of instrumentalism for minorities may lie in its analytical and political effectiveness against the potent threat of majority primordialism.

In contrast, the state-revisionist perspective offers a radical alternative by suggesting a return to the politics of neo-segmentary state that would eschew the Euro-centric instrumentalist and primordialist ideas inherent in the Nehruvian model since 1947. Paradoxically, state-revisionism appears to anticipate the possibilities of state-breaking inherent in the logic of contemporary ethnic conflicts. But only a most optimistic interpretation of this perspective, however, would allow for a satisfactory management of these conflicts as a basis of state-building in contemporary India.