



Gujarat 2002 - The Politics of Polarization: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

Popular explanations of riots as political manipulation of the 'masses' whereby shrewd politicians and elites enthrone community sentiments for electoral gains, as well as the explanatory thesis of communalism as masking deeper socio-economic interests, overlook deeper structural processes such as the specific historicity of Islam in India. Given the hybrid and heterogeneous nature of Indian Islam, this article looks at two contemporary structural processes of change - modernization and subsequent secularization - to construct a theoretical framework to understand the dynamics of religious identity mobilizations particularly in the light of the Gujarat Carnage in 2002. This paper critically reviews the immediate context of Gujarat 2002, and the syncretic traditions of localised Islam. It then overviews postmodern discussions of a super imposed modernity, to finally begin to make a case for approaching culture with a critical and historical perspective and view conflict and identity mobilizations as open ended phenomenon having context specific politics.

Author Profile

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'Unity in Diversity' is an oft used phrase to describe the plural rubric of Indian society and the essential civilizational unity of far flung geographic regions thrown together by the post colonial nation-building project.¹ Focusing particularly on Muslim communities in India, this article examines the ramifications of such an overarching structure of cultural hybridity in the context of two important contemporary processes of change - modernization and subsequent secularization. I attempt to gain a thicker understanding of the dynamics of the Gujarat carnage of 2002 where following the mystery shrouded attack on the Sabarmati express train coach carrying *kar sewaks*² in Godhra (resulting in the death of 59 persons) a systematic pogrom was unleashed on Muslim communities with the alleged complicity of state machinery leading to over 2000 persons getting killed and 150000 left homeless.

Gujarati Muslims are a heterogeneous group of Ismailis, Chhipas, Khojas, Bohras, Memmons, Sunnis and several other sub sects and trading communities that can be situated at the overlap between the broad classifications of Sunni Islam and Ismailism. Historically these groups have jostled each other over resources and jockeyed for power by aligning themselves with the ruling elite be it the Mughals (16th - 18th century AD) or the Marathas (mid 17th- 19th century AD) rather than a put forth a unified front. Therefore the categories of 'Muslim' or even 'Gujarati Muslim' are umbrella terms that gloss over and subsume the complexities of the subject positions of this heterogenous group; yet ironically, the violence in Gujarat had done precisely that by erasing all such differences and homogenously categorizing them into a single entity.

Much sociological work has been done of late to demonstrate the plurality, internal differentiations and divergent origins of Indian Muslims and the limitations of an exclusively textual understanding of Islam that would conceptualize it as a single unified tradition ignoring the specific historicity of the religious experience of Islam in India.³ Given such a fundamental syncretic intermingling of different groups in Indian

¹ The phrase 'Unity in Diversity' grew in popularity with the nationalist movement and later after independence as a coinage that in an ideological and ahistorical manner constructed a notion that all peoples of India shared a common civilizational base that overrode vast linguistic, religious and cultural diversities in order to culminate in an Indian state that would encompass its peoples as one nation.

² *Kar sewaks* are volunteers of the militant Hindu nationalist organization – Vishwa Hindu Parishad – who on February 27, 2002 were returning from Ayodhya which is the epicenter of the political mobilizations initiated by the VHP since the early 1990s to build a new temple on the Babri mosque site (resulting the death of 59 persons)

³ For a review refer to Nasreen Fazalbhoy, "Sociology of Muslims in India: A Review," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, 26 (1997): 1547-1551.

I Ahmed, *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India*, (Manohar: New Delhi, 1981). Also, there were scattered articles in the four volumes of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* which I. Ahmed edited between 1973 and 1981.

F Robinson, "Islam and Muslim Society in South Asia," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, ns, 18, 2 (1983): pp 301-05.

Veena Das, "For a Folk Theology and Theological Anthropology of Islam," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 18 (1984): 292-300

G Minault "Some Reflections on Islamic Revivalism vs Assimilation among Muslims in India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 18 (1984): 301-05.

society, I would like to interrogate how the trend of identity/religious mobilizations can erupt in a kind of violence that homogenizes them into a single category as witnessed in riots and polarization of communities that have lived alongside each other for centuries. I also look at the roots of the creation of such a 'suspect minority'⁴ with respect to the political collapse of the Mughal rule and the colonial apparatus that endorsed a separation concept, culminating in a different brand of nationalism (negotiated by a certain class of Muslims) and the scars of partition in those who stayed behind.

This article grew out of a basic question, namely, 'who makes riots' or 'why do people who have lived in close proximity, whose lives and destinies are interlinked and who in times of mundane normalcy live lives of close economic and social exchange mutate into an unrecognizable vicious mob in a fit of frenzy?'. A review of the literature on riots and ethnic violence posits many perspectives and means of answering these questions. While I found that a great deal has been written on Gujarat 2002 in terms of clarifications on nomenclature – about how the usage of the term 'riot' implies a clash of certain equal and opposing forces while what happened in Gujarat was nothing short of a 'carnage' or a pre-planned attempt at ethnic cleansing – and on the subsequent socio-economic fate of the Muslims in Gujarat, what appears to be missing is a sociological study of the Gujarati Muslims and their behavioral/interaction patterns vis-a-vis Gujarati Hindus.

Several authors theorized in general about the political and electoral expediency of riots stressing how no riot can continue beyond a few hours without the active connivance of the local police and magistracy and the meticulous manner in which it is carried out thereby betraying a preplanned and 'institutionalized riot system'.⁵ The lack of equitable development is often cited as the cause of community based violence⁶ where the ruling elite obscures the real issues and interests by provoking unrest and operationalising it by stirring an 'irrational' frenzy among the underclass over non-issues. The political manipulation theory is the most popular where shrewd politicians enthrone community sentiments and for electoral gains get a riot sequence organized.

While all the above are important facets in a comprehensive understanding of communal violence, the fact of the syncretic intermingling of the groups involved over centuries of shared culture, tradition and economic exchange, in this case Hindus and Muslims, adds perturbing complexity to the whole episode.

C Lindholm "Caste in Islam and the Problem of Deviant Systems: A Critique of Recent Theory," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 20, 1 (1986): 61-73.

⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering partition: violence, nationalism, and history in India* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 168.

⁵ Paul R Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press 2003 and Delhi: Oxford University Press 2004).

⁶ Yoginder K Alagh reminds us that any serious-minded understanding must be located in the dual recognition that Gujarat as 'a powerhouse of industrial growth' simultaneously marked by 'a neglect of a larger vision of development... a neglect of the human factor'. If only this faultline were better, more creatively, managed (and civil society resources imaginatively harnessed in relief and rehabilitation) Gujarat will become a relatively violence free state. He urges a notion of Gujarat development as a 'major process of confidence building so that a large number of economic and social actors once again start functioning autonomously' – Yogender Alagh, "The Powerhouse and Its Nemesis," *Seminar* 513 (2002): 73-77.

Also, both the political manipulation theory and the explanatory thesis of communalism as masking deeper socio-economic interests seems to treat religious mobilizations as 'a disease in body politics' and work on the assumption of a universal model of social evolution where anything other than secularization is seen as an aberration.⁷ It has also been argued that much of the religious and ethnic violence in contemporary south Asia could be attributed to the forced breakdown of the 'traditional community' by the dominant westernized ruling elite and the consequent search for packaged/manageable forms of religion that would serve as a political ideology seemingly resisting the desacralisation of life as Ashis Nandy outlines in his essay.⁸

Given such a double bind, one has to realize that the choice is not between the homogenizing discourse of modernization theory that decries an 'incomplete modernity' in India and the 'nativist'/quasi- postmodernist celebration of 'community'. One needs to look at the cultural processes in contemporary times by using an open ended concept of social or cultural identities. To understand communities today in a sociological light, it is not sufficient to explain away identity mobilizations as communalism or casteism; instead one needs to survey the politics of their mobilizations or, to put it in Benedict Anderson's words, 'the style of their imagining'.⁹

The purpose of this study is to formulate an integrated theoretical framework to understand the specific instance of Gujarat 2002 with respect to larger questions. Typically this would include the structural modalities of modernity one takes for granted; the democratic party system increasingly deriving from 'traditional' social categories of caste and religious community (old structures now taking on new role functions), imports of colonial modernity such as the state and discourses of secularism. I do not seek to show how the 'primordial' and 'irrationalities' of traditions resurface intermittently making for a pet preoccupation of Indian sociologists, namely the modernization of 'Indian' tradition.¹⁰ This sort of dichotomous binary opposition

⁷ Veena Das, *Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, (Delhi: OUP, 1994).

⁸ Ashis Nandy, "The twilight of certitudes: secularism, Hindu nationalism and other masks of deculturation" in *Tradition, Pluralism and Identity: In Honour of T.N. Madan*/edited by Veena Das, Dipankar Gupta and Patricia Uberoi. (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications, 1999).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁰ Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*. (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1969).

M J. Levy, *Modernization & the Structure of Societies: The organizational contexts of societies* (New Jersey: Transaction Publications, 1996).

Bernard S Cohn and Milton Singer, *Structure and change in Indian society* (Chicago : Aldine Publishers Co., 1968).

M N Srinivas, *Social change in modern India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1966).

Yogendra Singh, *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*, (Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1986)

S N Eisenstadt and S Noah, *Modernization: Protest and change* (Englewood Cliffs : Prentice-Hall, 1966)

presupposing a pre-existing tradition and particularly an 'Indian' one¹¹ is what I seek to resist by demonstrating how identities are perennially in a state of 'being' and 'becoming', to borrow a phrase from existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Satre,¹² in such a way that they are constantly being performed, redefined and in the process of being something but never achieving a stable completion.

Politics of the mobilizations of multiple, fluctuating subject positions that often intersect and compete are context specific and can only be understood through a layered, non linear analysis (one that does not assume a natural progression from 'communal' primordial values to that of a modern consensual civil society where irrationalities are debated and resolved) and this is what I seek to arrive at by first reviewing the immediate context of Gujarat 2002 and the syncretic traditions of localised Islam which means that polarisation and alienation is not a predicament intrinsic to a particular religious sensibility. I then move on to the postmodern discussions of a super imposed modernity, to begin to make a case for approaching culture with a critical and historical perspective where conflict and identity mobilizations are viewed as open ended phenomenon having context specific politics.

"Indian Islam"

Imtiaz Ahmad in a 1972 article¹³ in the Contributions to Indian Sociology makes a case for a truly comprehensive 'Sociology of India' and stresses that it needs to be a rounded picture that includes non-Hindu religious communities. While the tendency to equate Indian society with Hindu society goes back to the Indologists who had very essentialist notions about oriental culture and religion, exclusively textual understandings of religious communities are equally limited. Islam in India shows a marked divergence between formal and actual religious beliefs and practices; between folk and Great traditions. This is quite unlike what Clifford Geertz¹⁴ describes as the 'typical mode of Islamisation' where, given the historical roots of conversion to Islam, there occurs a slow but conscious rejection of syncretic elements that persist as remnants of pre-conversion orientation and ethos only to finally result in a gradual shrinkage of the heterodox religious complex.

¹¹ Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? as A K Ramanujan asks with emphasis on each word for different meanings in an essay by that name. eg: **Is** there **an** Indian way of thinking? Is there an **Indian** Way of Thinking, Is there an Indian Way of **Thinking** etc. A K Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" In *India Through Hindu Categories*, McKim Marriott ed. (New Delhi/London: Sage publications 1990)

¹² Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

¹³ Imtiaz Ahmad, "For a Sociology of India" *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 6 (New Delhi: Sage, 1972), 172 - 178.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz *Islam observed: Religious development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1971)

While Islam does have a holistic principle in terms of the concept of the chosen people, the church and the *Umma* as a global community of believers, sociologists like Yogendra Singh¹⁵ have made the very significant distinction between the Great tradition of a pan-Indian Islam and its Little traditions. Like the Great Tradition of Hinduism, Islam too had undergone many orthogenetic changes from its revelation through Prophet Mohammed in AD 570 to AD 632 in Arabia. When the originally nomadic socio-cultural milieu and an egalitarian tribal social structure was exposed to the mercantile and agrarian economy the social organization of Islam changed. The political expansions of Islam after the death of the Prophet to Syria, Iraq, Persia and Egypt, transformed the egalitarian and democratic structure of power into a feudal authoritarian pattern and a contradiction between the religious elite (ulema) and the political elite began to manifest itself.

The importance of this discussion on the journey of Islam to India lies in the critical understanding of how religions change and evolve according to the interactions with the cultures they come in contact with. Such a dynamic understanding of Islam is not only relevant with respect to the essentialism of today's 'Islamophobia' but also the manner in which the 'Gujarati Islam', as it were, has certain intrinsic peculiarities born out of contact and interaction with the Hindu traditions. The Anthropological survey of India says that Muslims in Gujarat are divided into distinct sects - the Shia followers consist of the Bohra Muslims and the Khojas, and a Sunni majority, divided into Saiyad, Sheikh, Moghul and Pathan. The occupational groups (mostly traders) within the Sunni community are Memons, Mansoori, Rangrez, Quereshi, Fakir, Ghanchi etc most of which are Hindu converts.

The elites, seen to be the bearers of the Great Tradition in India, constituted the uppermost segment of society and did not come from indigenous converts. Saiyads and Sheikhs belong to the nobility of Islam which has traditionally occupied religious offices. This distinction is important because there is a tendency to view Islam as free of caste hierarchies and as consisting of a homogenous population. Singh demonstrates how with interaction with local cultural practices, Indo Islamic little traditions evolved consisting of folk rituals, institutions and even vestiges of caste groups that are inimical to the Muslim faith.

Singh traces the Islamic tradition in India through several phases¹⁶: in the Mughal phase, they used to be qazis (judges), muftis (preachers), faujdars (district administrators) and courtiers which were all positions of pre-eminent economic status. With the British regime, Mughal faujdars were supplanted by British magistrates, military establishments of Nawabs were depleted and several far reaching changes in the positions of the social and economic elite were imposed. In the nineteenth century, the various pulls in reformation movement of the Great Islamic tradition began to polarize into two schools - one which stood for liberalism and peaceful reform and the other

¹⁵Yogendra Singh, *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*, (Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1986).

¹⁶ Yogendra Singh, *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*, (Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1986), 60.

which was more for orthodoxy and militarism. This tussle is said to represent the psycho-cultural anguish of the Muslim elites at their alienation from power. In this process the Islamic tradition in India got politicized and was rendered conscious of its self identity largely by refusing to participate in the modalities of modernization.

But the fact remains that even Muslim fundamentalist and reformist movements (eg. Mujahideen of the 19th century) have not succeeded in stamping out these syncretic and folk beliefs that have more parity with the belief system of a Hindu neighbour rather than a contemporary in the Arab world. Thus we see how rather than totally displacing heterodox religious beliefs and ritual observances, Islamisation often results in the acceptance of a somewhat modified version of the religious complex which was originally prevalent. Ahmad argues that there exist several levels in the religious system of the Muslims in India and the beliefs, values and ritual practices at each level enjoy a certain autonomy, "being relevant for different purposes but at the same time remaining an integral part of Islam in India¹⁷".

At the first level are beliefs and practices belonging to formal Islam derived from the Scriptures, while the second level is of a more limited spread. He characterizes as third level 'pragmatic or practical religion' and this practiced Islam is essentially pluralist and local in character. What needs to be noted is that these levels co-exist; what Mandelbaum has called the 'transcendental and pragmatic religious complexes' are a part of an integrated religious system even in Indian Islam. It would then be erroneous to think of the pragmatic complex as eventually an eliminable one to be replaced by a 'pan-Islamic system'.

Perceval Spear traces the historical emergence of Muslims as a separate community in India and posits that it was in the 300 years up to 1500 that the Muslims in India became a community with specific characteristics rather than a collection of groups or individuals. According to him "there was in this community an element of separateness or uniqueness, the Islamic heritage; there was also an element of identity, of oneness with the country. An Indian Muslim was now very different from a Muslim in Persia, Arabia or the Turkish lands."¹⁸

What is important is that the concept of separateness began to gain ground from the time of the Mughals. With the political collapse of the Mughal era, the community felt the jolt in a very real way and nationalist movement aggravated the wounds. And by the time of the Partition in 1947, Muslims had come to consider themselves not so much as an Indian minority with special rights, but as a separate community with a distinct civilization. Indian Islam had been remarkable for its identification with India without ceasing to be Islamic. But the way nationalism was being negotiated, estranged most as

¹⁷ Imtiaz Ahmad, "For a Sociology of India" *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 6 (1972): 172 - 178.

¹⁸ Perceval Spear, "The Position of the Muslims, Before and After Partition" in *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity*, ed. Philip Mason (London and New York: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1967), 35.

democracy meant majority rule and majority were Hindus. When the demand for a separate state was being voiced by a certain section of upper class Muslims - urban, reflexive, Westernized and formalized - that was no longer certain about its standing within a 'Hindu majority' nationalism, this notion of separateness was manipulated. With partition however the scars on those who stayed behind were very marked.

But what becomes important to study is the manner in which the Little tradition of Islam or what Yogendra Singh calls "Islamisation" grew. Many of the Hindu lower castes that converted to Islam for upward social mobility still observed the Hindu calendar and worshipped many Hindu Gods. This means that the Little traditions of Islam have been symbiotically integrated with the Little traditions of Hinduism for hundreds of years.

Thus as we see, within specific local sites, Muslim households identify closely with their non-Muslim (particularly Hindu) neighbours; so much so that the intrinsic character of the Islam they practice is modified. Indian Islam has elements of caste in spite of non-hierarchical nature of formal Islam. In rural parts, they participate in the jajmani system of relations and service Hindu families (as bangle-sellers etc) and vice versa. Furthermore, Islam is highly internally differentiated into converts from lower status groups like Ajlafs while Ashrafs have Arabian antecedents and enjoy higher status. Amongst the upper strata in North India itself there are Sheikhs, Pathans and Sayyadas (priests). Though ritual services were rendered by respective priests in each community, every other sub group practiced its own specialized trade thereby producing solidarity.

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Modernity, Secularization and the State

Given the above syncrecity of "Indian Islam" can a notion of increasing separateness be reason enough to conclude that inter community hostility is germane to Indian society? History and the spatiality of present day riots and other instances suggest that there is more to it than meets the eye. Let us look at how the modernizing ideology of secularization has functioned for further light on the process and politics of polarization that can erupt into 'othering', irrational stereotypes and pathologically fratricidal riots. Amitav Ghosh in his novel *'The Shadow Lines'* while referring to riots especially those around Partition, constructs a very useful metaphor - one of fighting ones mirror image - and therefore being locked into this infinite cycle of violence which he calls the 'pathology of the subcontinent'. Given the above facts about how deeply intertwined, dependant (and yet distinct) Hindu and Muslims communities have come to be even in their self definition, it really becomes quite a perplexing task to understand how fault lines that could get aggravated form in the social cement. For this purpose it may be instructive to review existing opinions about the same.

¹⁹ According to the classic Durkheimian thesis greater differentiation and a division of labour leads to greater solidarity. Thus the level of interdependence and horizontal inter-community civic engagement is quite high. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*. Trans. George Simpson. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).

T K Oommen²⁰ posits that the Western context and experience from which the ideology of secularism emerged are quite different from the Indian context and experience. So does the word communalism which had a positive connotation in the industrial west where it is seem to be an alternate and way of life to the traditional one supposedly disintegrating and being depersonalized under the impact of industrial urbanization. He goes on to say how the sacred and the profane is intertwined in an authentic representation of life therefore perfect rationalism and secularization aimed at 'separating man and the society from the transcendental and the divine is a conceptual impossibility.'

Secularism is often perceived as the onward march of rationality aided by science and abetted by technology; the scientific temper is believed to be displacing religious values. Then one has to ask if all symbolization and meaning creation are as much religious as they are cultural activities. For religion has two essential dimensions – belief and ritual – the first needs to be reinforced and the second ought to be re-enacted in the collective context. So to privatize religion is to liquidate it; efforts to replace the sacred with the secular are empirically impossible. Here Oommen is not talking about how religion is so suffused in every capillary of Indian society that secularism cannot but break into communalisms once in a while. He is dealing with the deeper ontological roots of the two concepts to show how the concept of secularism is intrinsically flawed (where do we see a perfect secularism? the West? – look at xenophobic France).

Since the advent of nation-building and conscious modernization, most people believe that the opposite of religious fundamentalism is secularism. Culture in modernization theory was seen from a teleological-evolutionist perspective where the process of modernization/development would inevitably bring about a secular society. In this framework of thinking, it was assumed that as development process matured, the individual and class would replace earlier 'traditional' ascriptive communitarian identities eventually leading to the emergence of a modern associational 'civil society'. Rationality rather than culture would be the guide to human action. This is what was meant to be modern. The dispute until the eighties was not on the wisdom and politics of the enlightenment project but on the method of achieving it.

Therefore, following this line of mainstream development thought, New Social Movements²¹ have no value. They would just be problems of transition which would disappear once perfect modernity was achieved. But with the collapse of the Nehruvian consensus, the idealized promise of the post independence development dream built on science, dams and import substitution policy and largely as a response to these new mobilizations and identity politics, the concept of the 'community' returned to social science discourses. Advocates of this school such as Ashis Nandy and Vandana Shiva turned the developmentalist paradigm and modernization theory upside down. They pointed to the 'violence' that an alien/ western project (abetted by the local ruling elite) of modernization inevitably inflicted on the common people. The process of

²⁰ T K Oommen, *State and Society in India. Studies in Nation-building*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1990).

²¹ T K Oommen, *Nation, Civil Society and Social Movements: Essays in Political Sociology*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2004).

modernization invariably victimized the already marginalized social groups, traditional cultural values of native society and ecology. The only achievement of the modernization process was an unsustainable consumer society. This 'nativist' perspective also implicitly emphasized the virtues of traditional culture that had seemingly kept the ecological and social balance intact for centuries.

Ashis Nandy in an article "The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu nationalism and other masks of deculturation" while drawing upon his key note address at the XVIIth International Congress of History of Religions makes an important point about secularism. He says that the politics of religious and ethnic violence is basically the politics of secularism and secularization. 'Communalism and secularism are not sworn enemies but disavowed doubles of each other' in that both are birthed by the historically specific project of modernity in South Asia and the 'language of secularism is wielded by an elite and marks out a class that speaks the language of the state, (either in conformity or dissent)'. As modernized Indians, the concept of secularism is a principle of exclusion and rationality in an otherwise 'irrational' society that gives them access to state power.

He locates communalism in the same frame of modernity; Hindutva and other forms of 'ready made, packaged forms of religion' that serves as a manageable form of religion in a modern society and as a political ideology seemingly resisting the desacralisation of life. Once a society is secularized, people get acutely aware of a living in a desacralised world and start searching for faiths or ideologies linked to faiths in an effort to return to 'traditional forms of a moral community' that would give meaning to their life. This explains why many expatriate South Asians in the West getting defensively traditional in an attempt to hold on to an imagined notion of cultural purity and preserve identities that they find undergoing adaptive transformation.

But what needs to be noted is the fact that many distorted or perverted versions of religion in circulation today in modern and semi-modern India owe their origins to this perception of the triumph of secularism due to its being an aggressive agenda of the state rather than there being a persistence of traditions. Hindutva revivalism draws from such a perception of secularism having gone too far by weakening public morality, opening the country to the 'licentiousness' of western culture and pandering to minorities - all of which can only be remedied by forging a strong, disciplined, and united Hindu nation under the aegis of a timeless civilizational and cultural ethos. In this light Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena would count as 'two of the most secular parties in India' in the manner in which they repudiate the sanctity of religion and go so far as to 'use'/'misuse' it. Communalism therefore becomes the perverted child of modernity as much as secularism, rational-legal organization or the democratic process. Nandy says:

"Even riots or pogroms are becoming secularized in South Asia. They are organized the way a rally or strike is organized in a competitive, democratic polity, and usually for the same reasons - to bring down a regime or discredit a chief minister here or to help an election campaign or a faction there. Some political parties have 'professionals' who specialize in such violence, and like true professionals do an expert job of it."

Even Paul Brass²² draws attention to the meticulously organized fashion in which riots happen; he calls it the development of an 'institutionalized systems of riot production (IRS)'. Refuting the argument presented in the work of Ashutosh Varshney²³ concerning the critical importance of 'civic engagement' in riot prevention and the absence thereof as equally important in explaining the occurrence of riots, he focuses on *how* riots are produced rather than on *why* they happen. Emphasizing on how pre-planned collective violence is he says that,

"in sites where riots of a particular type are endemic, they are a grisly form of dramatic production in which there are three phases: preparation/rehearsal, activation/ enactment, and explanation/interpretation. Preparation and rehearsal are continuous activities. Activation or enactment of a large-scale riot takes place under particular circumstances, most notably in the case of competitive political systems in a context of intense political mobilization or electoral competition in which riots are precipitated as a device to consolidate the support of ethnic, religious, or other culturally marked groups by emphasizing the need for solidarity in face of the rival communal group. The third phase follows after the violence in a broader struggle within, but also outside, the local community to control the explanation or interpretation of the causes of the violence. In this phase, wider elements in society become involved, including journalists, politicians, social scientists, and public opinion generally."

This third phase is marked by a process of blame displacement in which the social scientists themselves become implicated, a process that does not isolate effectively those most responsible for the production of violence, but diffuses blame widely, blurring responsibility, and thereby contributing to the perpetuation of violent productions in future. He claims that a hegemonic discourse exists in Indian society, which he calls the communal discourse, which provides a framework for explaining riotous violence. That framework allows Indian citizens, particularly its dominant castes and classes, to accept the persistence of such violence in their society without seeing it as a fundamental flaw in their democracy, their essential nonviolence, their acceptance of Indian cultural diversity, in short, their ideals. This is what he calls denial and blame displacement.

"Blame displacement makes it possible to acknowledge the existence of evils such as riotous communal violence and pogroms by attributing violent practices to others or to natural human propensities that must be accepted by any realistic person as a part of life. It makes it possible, also, either to accept the violence as inevitable or to direct rhetoric or action towards one's favorite causes that may or may not have anything to do with the violence."

²² Paul R Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press 2003 and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a case study of Meerut, see Paul R Brass, "Development of an Institutionalised Riot System in Meerut City, 1961 to 1982," *Economic And Political Weekly* 39, 44 (Mumbai: Sameeksha Trust Publication, 2004): 4839-4848.

²³ Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

The labeling of Gujarat 2002 as a 'riot' which implies a sense of two equal and opposing forces clashing, thereby glossing over the genocidal features of the event is also a case of blame displacement.

"...post hoc labeling of incidents of collective violence is an important aspect of the political struggle to gain control of their interpretation."

Furthermore, the killing of the *kar sevaks* in the train station in Godra was espoused as the triggering cause much before any verifiable facts about the incident came to light showing how blame displacement began early on in the horrific series of events.

But the point to be noted here is that riots have to be organized because ordinary citizens are not easy to rouse to participate in them. As Nandy says, at one time, secularism had something to contribute to Indian public life. But "that context presumed a low level of politicization, a personalized, impassionate quality in collective violence, its expression and execution". As ethnic and religious violence has become more impersonal, organized, rational and calculative (as have been noted by several scholars about the concentration camps in Hitler's Germany)²⁴ in the methodical, efficient and instrumental means-ends calculations employed that leaves values and moral evaluation out of the equation, it has come to represent more a pathology of rationality than irrationality. Modernity and secularism has become chronically susceptible to being co-opted or hijacked by the politically ambitious and dependant on those controlling the state.

The Way Out?

Thus, Nandy and likeminded sociologists posit that riots and inter-community tensions are a natural by-product of the path of modernization India has chosen. The fear of religion supposedly part of a more pervasive fear of the people and of democracy, has thrown up various readymade, packaged forms of faith for the 'rootless' and 'alienated' who populate urban, modernized South Asia. The fact that riots occur more in urban areas than 'traditional' rural areas is used to substantiate this point. Therefore what is implied is that the only institutions that can provide the solution are those that belong to the 'little traditions' of local community life which are the products of many centuries of coping with social change.

²⁴ Z Bauman in the book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2000) refers to how the holocaust, rather than being an aberration, operated on the same principles of bureaucratic organization of modern societies which would explain its scale. Using the typology of Max Weber he shows how it is the detached instrumental rationality which Weber regards the organizing principle of modernity (as against value/belief rationality, emotional-rationality and traditional custom or unconscious habit) that executed the Final Solution. '[Auschwitz] was also a mundane extension of the modern factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings and the end-product was death, so many units per day marked carefully on the manager's production charts... the brilliantly organized railroad grid of modern Europe carried a new kind of raw material to the factories. It did so in the same manner as with other cargo. In the gas chambers the victims inhaled noxious gas generated by prussic acid pellets, which were produced by the advanced chemical industry of Germany. Engineers designed the crematoria; mangers designed the system of bureaucracy that worked with a zest and efficiency... the overall plan itself was a reflection of the modern scientific spirit gone awry" (pg 8).

But where does that leave us? Though ours is certainly not an unproblematic modernity, it cannot be reversed. Democratic, legal, information processes that have percolated widely cannot be dispensed with. Furthermore, though the critiques of development sound nuanced and intellectually fashionable, the dichotomy of traditionalism and modernity they use is quite problematic. In fact their conceptions of 'history' and modernity and tradition are not very different from those of the modernization theory framework. Both essentialise and attribute certain fixity to traditional cultures thereby overlooking the specificities of the historical process of change in non-western societies and their experience of modernity. It 'precludes the possibility of seeing tradition as strenuously contested and redefined by different communities'²⁵

Both 'nativist' arguments (critiques of modernization) as well as the communalism thesis (elite manipulate masses obfuscating their 'real'/class interests) though begin from different points in trying to explain polarization, have some commonalities. Both point out the complicity of the state. In the case of communalism thesis amongst the proponents of modernity, as Veena Das points out,

"In this view, South Asian Societies are threatened by the lack of homogeneity and the absence of institutionalized mechanism for the regulation of differences. Hence a strong state is necessary to ensure order in society and to proclaim a new order based rational and scientific principles of management."²⁶

But there is really no need to choose between the homogenizing discourse of modernization theory and the 'nativist' celebration of community. The need is to evolve a language through which one can talk of diverse modernities from a non-teleological perspective.²⁷ After this overview on identity politics and different conceptualizations of polarization, I have not been able to come up with a single factor explanation for riots or even Hindu-Muslim conflict. There can be no way of ascertaining that a single solution to the issue can be found at all; there can only be contingent workable solutions and means of using discourses of modernity, secularism and development, however problematic they are, to address various issues at different points in time. As has emerged the alternative to communalism is certainly not to promote and reinforce the discourse of secularism; perhaps the alternate discourse with resonance for the particular time might be a development discourse addressing the economic backwardness of Muslim communities. Since nothing can be the unitary 'grounded truth or centre' of any discourse or intervention strategy, one can only 'recentre' and use contingent solutions and concepts like modernity however contested they are. The struggle to cope with the problems of modernity will have to be fought on the terrain of modernity itself and for the most part with the weapons forged in modernity.

²⁵ Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir and Vivek Dhareshwar, ed., *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, (Calcutta: Seagull, 1993).

²⁶ Veena Das, *Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, (Delhi: OUP, 1994).

²⁷ Arjun Appadurai *Modernity at large: cultural aspects of globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

Conclusion

Thus we end with more questions than answers. We do not have a comprehensive, all encompassing explanation that answers the initial question of 'who makes riots?' Nor is this a manual guide on to how to prevent communal polarization. But as is certain, a good analysis is an important prerequisite for policy advocacy and a good analysis is one that is multifaceted even if not conclusive. What I sought to do was add another dimension and a certain theoretical depth to the discussions on Gujarat which I thought was missing in recent literature and interrogate the frameworks within which communal identity politics is typically analyzed.

What has emerged with certainty however is only a means of approaching culture with a critical and historical perspective and such conflict and identity mobilizations as open ended phenomenon having context specific politics. As Jodhka²⁸ says, a means to study community identities is not through primordial or substantivist perspectives but as a process of conscious mobilization of cultural difference. This helps us go beyond a reductionist notion of 'false consciousness' while analyzing identity mobilizations. My aim through this article has been to foreground the phenomenon of polarization in a nuanced fashion as having risen out of multiple causes and power dynamics. They are neither mere mechanizations of power hungry politicians, problems of law and order, outcome of a strange history, or the pathological condition of plural societies as ours nor even the inevitable by-product of non indigenous modernity. The maxim of 'unity in diversity' often used is misleading in its simplicity and what I sought to do was to add a certain thickness and depth to it.

In this framework as Stuart Hall argues, "Cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being".²⁹ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending space, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past, which is waiting to be found,... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."

Such a dynamic and open ended concept of social and cultural identities is probably what Benedict Anderson³⁰ meant when he explains that "communities are to be

²⁸ Surinder S. Jodhka, "Community and Identities: Conceptual Questions: Introduction" in *Community and Identities. Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India*, ed Surinder S. Jodhka (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publication, 2001).

²⁹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and Diaspora" In *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*, Ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225 as quoted in Surinder S. Jodhka, "Community and Identities: Conceptual Questions: Introduction" in *Community and Identities. Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India*, ed Surinder S. Jodhka (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publication, 2001).

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).

distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”.

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