

**Time warps : the insistent politics of silent □  
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CHAPTER 1

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Contending Stories in the Culture  
of Indian Politics  
*Traditions and the Future of  
Democracy*

**T**he young are given to analysis; they love to sift every issue threadbare with passionate scepticism and eager competence. The elderly tell stories. Fortunately for the latter, in recent years stories have become respectable in the social sciences, more so after some people have cleverly begun to call them narratives. However, listening to Indian stories can be trying, even in these post-modern days. Most of them lack a proper ending—this is no longer a crime, I am told—but they are also often not new, which is still an unforgivable sin in the global culture of knowledge. As with classical plays and ritual narrations of epics and sacred myths, these stories create their own surprises in the process of being re-told. So I need not apologise if you find my story is not new and lacks a proper ending; I shall apologise only if you find that I have not told it right.

This is actually a story about stories. It begins with the awareness that in ancient societies like China and India, which possess resilient cultural traditions, there is a certain ambivalence towards democratic politics. While drawing sustenance from traditions, democratic politics is also expected to alter and update such societies for the contemporary world. These countries have reportedly

fallen behind in the race that all countries these days breathlessly run to stay where they stand in the global Olympiad of nation-states. One enters this race not just with a political style which reflects specific cultural traditions, but also with a political process seeking to become a legitimate force of cultural change and promising to mediate between hope and experience, inherited fears and acquired ambitions. The contending stories of politics and traditions frame this process. They contain the ambivalence and anxieties associated with democracy in those afflicted by both, and they help construct the past in a way that makes possible meaningful political choices in the present.

Such stories also have shelf lives. They are born and they die; some after a long and glorious life, others after a brief, inglorious tenure. For instance, scholars of Indian political culture have, off and on, ventured the story of a stable culture facing an alien political order and, on the whole, unable to make much sense of it.<sup>1</sup> Their idea of Indian politics as a straightforward reflection of Hindu culture and personality now looks jaded not because of the passage of time and academic fashions, but because a different political situation has now gripped the public imagination—that of a culture being literally bombarded by new global challenges and trying to maintain its identity in the face of these. Likewise, the competing stories that others have produced—of cultural and psychological forces as epiphenomena, and of Indian politics as a

<sup>1</sup> The most famous of the works along these lines is Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958). However, the more typical of the changing temper of our times are those influenced by the post-War culture-and-personality studies or the economic-development-and-cultural-change literature. For instance, P. Spratt, *Hindu Culture and Personality* (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966); and K.W. Kapp, *Hindu Culture, Economic Development and Economic Planning* (New York: Asia, 1963). Readers who think that such summary trials of South Asian cultures is a now-defunct fashion may like to consult Dor Bahadur Bista, *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernisation* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1991).

sequence of modern economic forms vanquishing traditional structures of behaviour and ideas in order to establish the supremacy of a historically superior order—have not survived well either. The global resurgence of religion and ethnicity has taken better care of such economic determinism than have their academic opponents.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, the truth or falsity of such stories is of secondary importance; more important is the fact that neither rings true in the present global context.

I shall talk here of four persistent stories that seem to have survived the vicissitudes of time and continue to frame the relationship between politics and traditions in India. These paradigmatic stories can be read not so much as realistic descriptions of the styles of response to the changing relationship between society and politics—the global and the local, the personal and the collective—but as attempts to search out an ‘appropriate’ construction of Indian culture for contemporary purposes. As these purposes have changed, the stories have also changed, though not beyond recognition.

## I

In all four stories political style not only has a history, it is ‘history’. For it includes a construction of the Indian self as it has emerged from its encounters with the outside world. The first story, fabricated towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, mirrors the early impact of the colonial system, which began to bring with it in politics a social order organised more around religion and culture than around its polity. Not that India did not know politics, but colonial politics was a different kettle of fish. It denied the

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1959); D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962); and *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975).

autonomy of culture and, despite an official ideology of non-interference in society, prescribed a different lifestyle as the basis of politics.

The appeal of this story, which still dominates the consciousness of the more settled, established sections of the urban, Westernised middle class, is a major source of modern India's self-esteem. It draws heavily upon the experience of India's early exposure to the Raj. That exposure had a few notable features. First, the colonial political economy favoured the Brahminic castes in government appointments and in the modern professions which it opened up around the middle of the nineteenth century. The traditional skills of these castes helped them to reconcile work, worldview and selfhood by reinterpreting traditions—which was their prerogative as well as specialisation—and by ascribing acceptable meanings to exogenous bureaucratic, political, and judicial forms.

This was also the time when the colonial bureaucracy was socially non-interfering and the initiatives for social reform came mainly from Indians. Till about 1830—that is, for nearly seventy-five years—the colonial legal system was built on the customary laws of various Indian communities, though its points of reference in social matters were Brahminic and élite North Indian Muslim cultures. The educational system relied mainly on Sanskrit, Persian and the vernaculars, not English. Christian evangelism, to the chagrin of missionaries, was discouraged. All this favoured the upper castes and made them less defensive about the new political economy. To them, Westernisation looked like a relatively painless form of dissent, and any resistance to it irrational and cursed. Though their prominence in trade and commerce ended once business became a matter of entrepreneurial acumen rather than ideology, style or patronage, the upper-caste domination of public life lasted till the 1930s while that of the professions and bureaucracy still continues.<sup>3</sup> This long dominance, though consolidating the older caste

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most appropriate symbol of the first change was the collapse of the business empire of Dwarkanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath. Dwarkanath founded his business empire on jute, shipping and banking, and

hierarchy, has induced significant changes in the self-definition of the Brahminic sector.<sup>4</sup> Those belonging to it have learnt to live with a dissociation between their new means of livelihood—a secular incentive system having forced them to re-earn their élite status—and the older cultural norms. They do not view the demands of work-life as negating their private values. Nor do they expect the latter to interfere with the former. Neither is difficult in a culture that does not overdo the demand for internal consistency and encourages the accretion of new cultural elements, rather than the substitution of the old. This 'controlled split' has now become the marker of a distinctive style of political adaptation.

A deeper penetration of Western norms in the second half of the nineteenth century, along with growing British chauvinism and commitment to Europe's civilising mission, further damaged Indian self-esteem. The earlier style of adaptation now split into two, to cope with middle-class anxieties. One sought salvation in aggressive modernisation, the other in an odd form of reactive

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failed in all three. It must have taken a very special kind of enterprise to fail in the very three industries that were to become the backbone of the modern Indian economy within a short time.

On the changing nature of the dominance of the traditional élite castes, see D.L. Sheth, 'Castes and Classes in India: Social Reality and Political Representations', in V.A. Pai Panandikar and A. Nandy (eds), *Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Tata-McGraw-Hill, 1999), pp. 337–63.

<sup>4</sup> This can be considered the modern counterpart of the thesis of J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985). On the aggressive syncretism of the *babus*, one of the best descriptions is in Bengali, Sivanath Shastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Taskalin Banga Samaj* (1909) (Calcutta: New Age, 1957). But there are good discussions in Denis Dalton, *Indian Idea of Freedom* (Gurgaon: Academic, 1982); David Kopf, *British Orientalism and Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); and Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988). There is also a charming invocation of such ecumenism in Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1936).

Westernisation which wore the garb of cultural nationalism, to help crystallise the second story of politics and culture in modern India. The former survives today as the primary source of Indian liberalism as well as radicalism, the latter as the sire of Hindu nationalism and revivalism. If one is proudly and aggressively modern (and hence dismissive of most things native), the other is proudly and aggressively 'Hindu' (while rejecting all existing Hindus as a degenerate version of ancient Hindus—who now look, in retrospect, like a cheap, Eastern edition of India's imperious, Western rulers). Between them these offer the small but growing middle class two models of social change and two collective identities.

However, as the first group grew out of the reformism of the earlier phase, and as the era ended up favouring reactive nationalism, the second remains more typical of the period. Riding the growing political participation and exposure to new forms of communication, both of which had been effectively deployed for social reform in the earlier generation, cultural nationalists soon became a significant presence in Indian public life. They were the first Orientalists that the Orient itself produced in defence of the Orient. They depended mainly upon the knowledge that nineteenth-century Europe produced about India, and on their revaluation of the country's martial past. This they legitimised with the help of new and more this-worldly interpretations of some sacred texts, mainly the *Gita*—which had been earlier read usually as a text on non-dualist spiritualism—and by marginalising the more ecumenical upanishadic base of social reforms, so clearly a part of the first story. The response was underwritten by the British rediscovery of Kshatriyas as the true Indians, and the country's surviving princely class as the natural leaders of the masses (and incidentally as markers of the nobility of the noble savage). The Kiplingesque antipathy towards Anglicised, city-bred, effeminate babus was now not entirely unacceptable to the modern Indian.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Some examples of the internalisation of the British estimate of babus, and the resulting brutal self-denigration, are Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay,

The third story crystallised with the emergence of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in Indian politics, though some of the changes associated with him were probably inevitable and would have come about in any case. Beginning in the 1920s, while the upper castes could still cling to the leadership of the freedom movement—thanks to their Western education, Western-style nationalism, skills in modern communication, and the ability to forge solidarities on the basis of their Sanskritic/Brahminic identity—the attempts to mobilise larger support unintentionally unleashed other forces. More accessible cultural symbols had now to be invoked, entrenched social divisions had to be negotiated, the vernacular and the indigenous had to be rediscovered at the expense of the Sanskritic and the imported, and traditions in turn had to be reinterpreted so that they could be made palatable to modernists and could span the country's immense diversity. Gandhi was a response to these demands. He pushed the earlier, culturally less defensive first response to the margins, as an odd, indigenous form of political liberalism; and the more defensive second response towards a militant—some might say self-destructive—form of nationalism which tried to change the fate of the country through armed means. To the former, Gandhian mobilisational politics looked ideologically impure, a self-seeking demagogy or a Mephistophelean compromise with traditions. To the latter, it looked effeminate, unrealistic, disorganised, anti-statist and, above all, divisive in relation to Hindus. To both, the new politicians began to look de-ideologised, crude, rustic, sanctimonious, often given to ruthless power politics.

Gandhian politics did something more to Hindu nationalism.

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'Babu' (1873) in *Rachanabali* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1954), vol. II, pp. 10–12; Michael Madhusudan Dutt, 'Ekei ki Bole Sabhyata' (1860) in *Rachanabali* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1965), pp. 241–54; Ramanbhai M. Nilkantha, *Bhadrambhadrā* (1900) (Ahmedabad: Suryaprakash, 1932); and Saratchandra Charatopadhyay, *Srikanta*, in *Sahityasamagra* (1917) (Calcutta: Ananda, 1986), vol. 1, esp. part 1, pp. 268–324. Though written from a

Exactly as Hindu nationalism had split the earlier 'syncretic' style into both a creative, ecumenical approach to the West and a mainstream culture of collaboration, mimicry and self-hatred, Gandhian politics split Hindu nationalism into both a creative, if defensive, return to traditions (as in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Vivekananda and Brahmabandhav Upadhyay) and a mainstream culture of collaboration, mimicry and self-hatred which sought to re-engineer Hindus into better Hindus according to European ideas of nationality and nationalism.<sup>6</sup> It is certainly no accident that all three attempts on Gandhi's life in India, the last of which succeeded, were made by Hindu nationalists.

The fourth story can be construed as a gift of India's democratic revolution. After independence in 1947, there is now much less need to 'sell' politics as the pure pursuit of a cause. Politics has become a vocation. Like other vocations, it ensures economic and social mobility. Adult franchise favours previously peripheral groups willing to take advantage of their numbers (to challenge older hierarchies, paradoxically by allowing caste-based bargaining and competition); mass politics has become decisively non-Brahminic; and the literati, once so conspicuous in public life, has been virtually banished from politics.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, the brown version of the white man's burden, which has for long been a ruling principle in Indian

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different point of view, the emergence of religious nationalism and its links with existing religious traditions in India are neatly captured in T.N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> For the moment, I am ignoring the analogous process within South Asian Islam. For an example, see Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Bengal Muslims 1871–1906: Quest for Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> On the politics of this process, see Edward Shils, 'Influence and Withdrawal: The Intellectual in Indian Political Development', in D. Marvick (ed.), *Political Decision-makers* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1961), pp. 29–59; and D.L. Sheth, 'The Great Language Debate: Politics of Metropolitan versus Vernacular India', in Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India* (New Delhi, Sage, 1995), pp. 187–215.

politics, has also suffered decline. Once, the Brahminic self-concept of the scholar-politician had projected into politics a demand for Platonic—often Fabian or Marxist—*acharya*-kings. Now, it has made the *acharyas* the first victims of mass politics and thrown into further relief professional, de-ideologised politicians. As power seeps through the fingers of the older élite, they are becoming more open to an anomic, almost nihilistic politics of desperation. But even that has not yielded them much political dividend. Extremist politics, too, has ebbed, and though it has staged a partial comeback as the marginal politics of revivalism and militant separatism, it is obviously trying to adjust to long-term trends in Indian politics. (It is doubtful if the support that the Hindu nationalist parties get—roughly one-fifth of the votes polled—has much to do with their ideology; and, despite popular belief, separatism has never probably involved more than 25 million in a country of about one billion.)

Likewise, despite the entry of neo-Gandhian ideas into public life through a number of powerful grassroots movements, even the 'saintly' politics of the Gandhians has been contained and its major expositors turned into lonely messiahs or activist-thinkers with limited political appeal.<sup>8</sup> (This of course is no guarantee that some, like environmentalist Sundarlal Bahuguna, Anna Hazare, Medha Patkar or Vandana Shiva will not emerge in the future as rallying points of powerful new political formations.) For those telling, or

<sup>8</sup> The consensual decision-making style of many vernacular communities, dependent on a highly specified system of allocation of rights, duties, and responsibilities—and what many see as the widespread Indian tendency to prefer harmony over abstract justice—survives in many neo-Gandhian pleas for a non-competitive, party-less polity, and in certain forms of voluntarism. M.N. Roy, *Power, Parties and Politics* (Calcutta: Renaissance, 1960); and J.P. Narayan, 'Organic Democracy', in S.P. Ayar and R. Srinivas (ed.), *Studies in Indian Democracy* (Bombay: Allied, 1965) pp. 325–44. Narayan was the last Gandhian to lead a successful pan-Indian movement within mainstream politics along Gandhian lines.

living by, this story, Gandhi himself is an unattainable ideal, though he is not subjected to the hostility and ridicule to which the carriers of the first two stories are subjected.



Of the four stories, the first one is complete and can be considered the only one with 'global' ambitions. It dominates not merely Indian but also non-Indian perceptions of Indian politics. The story is well written and it has penetrated the higher rungs of modern education and 'official' historical consciousness in India. The second story dominates the consciousness of the newly urbanised and modernised and, especially, those among them who belong to the traditional élite confronting the loss of power. It has now penetrated some sections of India's power élite and constitutes a psychological substratum in some areas of popular culture. The third and fourth stories still remain half-articulate; they are now being written.<sup>9</sup> Like folklore and epics in oral cultures, however, they crucially

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However, within the 'one-party dominance system' that ruled the Indian polity for nearly three decades, decision-making depended not so much on a consensus of programme, ideology, or mutual gain, but on a subtler dynamics growing out of modes of demand articulation, expectations about desirable interpersonal behaviour, styles of conflict-resolution, and images of the 'true' leader as a faction-managing consensus builder. Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970).

The shift from the first and second stories to the third and the fourth is politically more interesting and hence it has generated some of the earliest studies of political culture in India. For example, W.H. Morris-Jones, 'Behaviour and Idea in Political India', R.N. Spann (ed.), *Constitutionalism in India* (Bombay: Asia, 1963), pp. 74–91; and Myron Weiner, 'India: Two Political Cultures', in L.W. Pye and S. Verba (eds), *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 199–244; Kothari, *Politics in India*, ch. 9.

<sup>9</sup> This may sound a strange proposition when one of the stories is associated with Gandhi, but actually most stories of Gandhi in India have been written

inform the public consciousness of a sizeable section, probably a majority, of India's citizens. They do so while the modern educational system and public discourse oscillate between the first two stories and modern Indians live out their lives fully convinced that they can master the intricacies of Indian culture within the format of the first two stories.

## II

The four stories—and the corresponding political styles—give some clues as to how the Indian literati, perhaps even India's functioning politicians, have at different times read the various cultural themes in Indian politics, as well as their origins and uses. The stories are also four modes of political adaptation and communication. You can enter public life riding any of them, though your success will depend on which particular strand dominates politics at the time. Let me now give two examples of highly resilient and apparently immutable cultural themes to show how their meaning and political use run through the four stories. I shall choose examples that not only inform popular stereotypes, but are also the implicit focii of scholarly debates on how Indian culture has fared in modern times.



There is a long tradition of scholarship which claims that the nucleus of the culture of Indian politics is a pervasive tendency to

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as a part of the first story and a few as that of the second. A partially successful recent attempt to break out of the straitjacket is Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: Analysis of Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989). However, one of the most exciting recent works that relocates Gandhi in Indian political culture is D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India* (Bangalore: South Forum and ICRA, 1992). For a brief, synoptic view of Gandhi's fate in contemporary Indian public life, see Ashis Nandy, 'Gandhi After Gandhi: The Fate of Dissent in Our Times', *The Little Magazine*, May 2000, pp. 38–41.

ignore history and the linear process of time.<sup>10</sup> The Indian seems to live with a concept of 'cyclical' time where the present, past, and future blend into a static 'timeless' absolute, and where progress and material well-being bear no direct relationship to progression in time. The result is submissiveness, passivity, and—if literary reflections are to be trusted—unbridled fatalism.<sup>11</sup> To many, this aspect of the Indian cosmology is the least tolerable; it seems to go with inadequate control over human affairs and nature, and to smack of a reification of reality, a global and 'besetting passion for metaphysics and philosophising', and 'abstraction of time, history and person'.<sup>12</sup>

This theme is particularly fascinating because of the discomfort it causes to many Indians, though that discomfort varies with the four stories. The first two stories treat the traditional Indian concept of time as a metaphysical liability that must be exorcised from Indian life for India to emerge as a historically self-conscious society, able to extract its civic values from history rather than from the sacred texts and epics. For the second story especially, while

<sup>10</sup> S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu View of History: Classical and Modern* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1959).

<sup>11</sup> Some examples are G.M. Carstairs, *The Twice-Born* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1957), esp. pp. 137–69; Dhirendra Narayan, 'Indian National Character in the Twentieth Century', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1967 (370), pp. 124–32, esp. p. 130; and N.C. Chaudhuri, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (London: Macmillan, 1951).

Often this has also shaped the external popular imagination of India. For instance, W.S. Maugham, *The Summing Up* (New York: Doubleday 1943); T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 13; and J.B. Priestly, *Man and Time* (London: Aldus, 1964), pp. 171–3.

<sup>12</sup> H. Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (London: Pantheon, 1951); Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and its Development* (New York: Beacon, 1959); R.N. Dandekar, 'Brahmanism', W.T. de Bary, et al. (eds), *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) pp. 1–36; and R.E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 32–42, 52–7.

timelessness may or may not have been an aspect of Indian cosmology, it certainly has been a liability for contemporary Hindus. Their ahistoricity has made them ignore the historical wrongs done to them by 'outsiders' and not allowed them to develop a proper sense of national dignity or pride. It has also discouraged them from organising and militarising themselves.

According to the first story, Indian attitudes to time and history, early in the colonial period, helped consolidate the stereotype of India as radically different from colonising societies. The stereotype probably did something more. It spared the new participants in the modern sector of inhibitory or incapacitating anxiety by assigning a certain amount of inevitability to British rule and the global dominance of the modern West. It spared them this anxiety by encouraging the belief that the alien government would ultimately have to give way due to the inexorable logic of destiny, and by allowing a passive acceptance of history at a time when active intervention seemed impossible.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the story goes, the Indian theory of time, by default, helped legitimise a newly emerging way of life and a style of scholarship in the West from which neither India nor the West has as yet broken free. Later scholars have claimed that this cultural strand has helped integrate different religions and castes, first within a single national movement and then within a nation-state.<sup>14</sup> At least one scholar has held the Indian concept of time responsible for an unconcern with worldly suffering in the country, with the ability to postpone explosive consumption demands of the kind that help planned development through a containment of consumption.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For instance, this theme runs through what is arguably the most important political novel ever written in India, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Anandamath* (1876–8), in *Rachanabali*, vol. 1; also Swami Vivekananda, *Modern India* (Almora: Advaita Ashram, 1913).

<sup>14</sup> D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> K.W. Kapp, *Hindu Culture, Economic Development and Economic Planning* (New York: Asia, 1963).

The first two stories also recognise that, even in a benighted ahistorical society like India, political mobilisation and competitive politics have eroded the stoicism and patience of the underprivileged. There is now growing historical consciousness and a refusal to accept the available as the fated. Apparently, resignation and apathy in many are clashing with hope and self-confidence, and at least some of the previously powerless are trying to change the 'fated' actively, through self-created roles.<sup>16</sup> Even the Gandhian strand has transformed the idea of renunciation which Indians are reportedly saddled with, made the 'saintly' style a criterion of charisma in mass politics, and introduced the ideas of active pacifism and directed asceticism.<sup>17</sup>

I am not here making the point that sacred texts can be interpreted in various ways or that traditional stereotypes can be broken. I am proposing that, rather than the theme itself, it is the debate and the use of the theme that defines politics *and*, more than the debates on the truth or falsity of such themes, it is their systematic re-interpretation from the viewpoints of the competing stories that shapes India's political culture.



My other example is the idea of hierarchy which, students of Louis Dumont know, is encrypted in the concept of dharma, codes of conduct or duty.<sup>18</sup> Often acting as the final source of temporal

<sup>16</sup> The paradigmatic work on the nature of this change is M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay: Asia, 1962). It was probably written as a part of the first story but has managed to cross frontiers and enter the third and fourth stories.

<sup>17</sup> D.M. Dutta, 'Political Legal and Economic Thought in Indian Perspective', C.A. Moore (ed.), *Philosophy and Culture, East and West* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii), pp. 569–93.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988). However, perhaps more immediately relevant to political culture is the brief comparative picture of hierarchy

power in India, dharma has influenced the organisation and legitimacy of political power, decision-making authority, and law. An impersonal, trans-moral sense of duty seems to supersede personal morality and equates inner detachment with freedom, from the sense of good as well as evil. Traditional socialisation, the extended family, caste, and village ties validate it.<sup>19</sup>

In the first story, dharma strengthens family and caste allegiances and, thus, limits individual autonomy, initiative and public responsibility. It reduces free-floating power, status, and resources and narrows political, social and occupational choices. The belief in a highly individualised path to salvation tends to hold each person responsible for his or her own worldly status, and gives him/her the power to acquire a new status in another life. Some scholars have gone so far as to diagnose dharma, not monism, as *the* final source of Indian narcissism and the Indian tendency to perceive politics as an amoral, clinical, ruthless pursuit.<sup>20</sup>

The second story is wary about the consequences of dharma. Those who live by the story are all too aware that it can cut two ways. It can be a potent symbol but also a practical hindrance in unifying Hindus and converting them into a cleanly defined, predictable nationality or ethnic grouping. In fact, this tension between the two faces of dharma has been a running theme in Hindu nationalist texts. In the fourth story, too, dharma sanctions social diversity and dissent, assumes that rightness and goodness vary with caste, occupation, age and sex, and grants intrinsic legitimacy to diverse goals

supplied by Alan Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> The term dharma is almost impossible to translate. However, there is a good discussion of it in P.V. Kane's *History of the Dharmashastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1946), vol. 3, pp. 241, 825–9. It also informs works like Irawati Karve, *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* (Poona: Deccan College, 1961); and P.H. Prabhu, *Hindu Social Organisation* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954), pp. 215–98.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, Dutta, 'Political, Legal and Economic Thought', pp. 571–3; also Spratt, *Hindu Culture and Personality*.



and criteria espoused by persons or communities. Dharma in this story neutralises dissent and radical innovations by accommodating them in a larger consensual system.

In the third story, the principle of hierarchy has a different role. To mobilise wider support, the freedom movement had to fight against all forms of sectarianism.<sup>21</sup> Not only did it challenge the caste-specific concept of dharma, it revalued many caste professions previously considered dirty or contaminating. Both the attributes have uncomfortable associations in contemporary Indian politics at a time when the traditional élite, handicapped by a participatory democracy, have begun to see all politics as dirty, corrupting and ill-informed—with the possible exception of some forms of authoritarian or ethno-chauvinist politics; whereas to many numerically strong, traditionally low-status communities, politics has become *the* means of rising in the social hierarchy. Indian politics is still grappling with this asymmetry. First, while the changing hierarchical relations and status-hunting supply a part of the ideational basis of competitive politics, this cannot be acknowledged and has to be camouflaged in conventional ideological terms. Caste leaders are sometimes treated as reactionaries, sometimes as ideologues, though everyone seems to know that they are both at the same time. The growing self-esteem of the upwardly mobile castes and their vernacular, non-Brahminic style, on the other hand, get justified in the new culture of politics as a more 'hard headed' and 'down-to-earth' ideology.

Secondly, as some of the older skills of 'lower' castes have become functional, they have acquired more political clout and have consolidated their new-found status by a second reinterpretation of sacred texts, remembered pasts and caste *puranas*. Simultaneously, as the traditional skills of some other castes have become

<sup>21</sup> On segmentation see Morris-Jones, 'Behaviour and Idea', pp. 82–3. Segmentation as reinforcing the distinction between the functions of political and religious authorities and strengthening secularism, see Smith, *India as a Secular State*, pp. 153–246.

dysfunctional or obsolete in the modern sector, they have lost status and have been, in some cases, pushed to destitution or extinction. In sum, while political changes have validated caste identifications, broadened the basis of caste ties, and politicised caste associations, they have, by these very means, changed the nature of caste and undermined many of its normative assumptions.<sup>22</sup> Castes now compete, cooperate or fall apart in a manner that explicitly invalidates the older hierarchy.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the previously disprivileged Shudra castes now occupy a significant sector of India's expanding middle class.<sup>24</sup>

Of all the so-called cultural immutables in Indian politics, the first story says, the idea of hierarchy as enshrined in the concept of dharma has shown the greatest resilience. Even the much vaunted Indian tolerance is framed in hierarchy; the accepted style of handling heterodoxy has been to bring the latter within the hierarchical order and thus neutralise it.<sup>25</sup> Authority in India may traditionally have been open to some degree of competition, pressures and fear of dislodgement, but it also has its 'natural, substantially hereditary seats' and cannot be subverted without modifying the entire structure within which it operates.<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly, the new occupational opportunities and work relations have allowed traditional, emerging, and functional hierarchies to operate at cross-purposes, but they have not weakened the principle of hierarchy.

<sup>22</sup> Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, esp. ch. 1; see also Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), part 1.

<sup>23</sup> The reader may notice that the link between dharma and ahimsa (nonviolence), so conspicuous in India's epic culture, especially in the Mahabharata, has not played that conspicuous a role in this story. Gandhi is respected and his memory venerated, but he is also often shelved as a symbol of unattainable heights of political morality and propriety.

<sup>24</sup> Sheth, 'Castes and Classes In India'.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 87–97, 112–19.

<sup>26</sup> W. H. Morris-Jones, *Parliament in India* (London: Longman, 1957).

Thus, Western education, while it encourages individual mobility, also creates new status relations. Not only has it become crushingly hierarchical itself, it now even confers upper-caste status.

Nonetheless, escaping the format of the first story, India's long tradition of heterodoxy does give a unique cultural basis to democracy. Indications of this are the legitimacy and the disproportionately important role assigned to leaders of the Opposition till 1967 (when the election results provided them with a formal basis), the ability to make large-scale political compromises (which contributes to the image of sanctimonious yet purchasable Indian leaders), and the ideological catholicity all parties try to acquire or to publicly project when they move closer to power.

### III

Both examples show that, though many elements of Indian political culture have their classical and non-canonical antecedents, they have been developing new referents. Indian political values now have more significant symbolic than psychological and social continuities. But the flux is not infinite either; the four stories set a limit to their variations.

It is also obvious that the apparently canonical Brahminic norms—in their pure or diluted forms—though still a formidable presence in the culture of Indian politics, have begun to play a more modest and ambivalent role. At one time, Sanskritisation and the Savarna or upper-caste identity endorsed the entire modern package, including liberal democracy. Now, as democracy has acquired wider cultural meaning, they endorse a certain scepticism towards the democratic process and towards those who have come to dominate it. This is despite the fact that in recent years, politics is becoming more elections-dominated or psephocratic, and parties are becoming essentially electoral machines. Both have allowed the pan-Indian middle class and the modern media to stage a dramatic comeback, giving a new lease of life to the Brahminic heritage and

its old bonding with modernity.<sup>27</sup> On the whole, however, democratic values have begun to derive strength from the more pragmatic, non-canonical cultures and the everyday life of ordinary Indians.

In this respect, the absence of a perfect accord among cultural norms, individual selfhood, and the political process has been a source of creative tension in Indian society. It has given India's traditional plurality a different kind of psychological basis, and it has given a new life to culture as a political reality. Instead of being a burden in contemporary times, culture has become a means of monitoring politics.



I have outlined four stories of the relationship between politics and culture floating around in modern India. This is not the way modern Indians, and certainly not the hard-boiled modernists, tell the stories. They prefer to tell one story to the exclusion of others; for them, these competing stories are only forms of false consciousness and distorted or conspiratorial constructions of history which can be better explained with the help of categories derived from one's favourite political or psychiatric theory. I shall now end by reflecting on how this narrative—which tells the four stories simultaneously—helps our understanding of Indian politics. I shall do so with a few broad propositions about the three main legacies of the double-edged role of modernity in Indian politics. After all, the first two stories are about the modernisation of India (even though in the second story the formation of nationality and nationalism are given primacy). These two stories also tell us how, as a means of coping with the confrontation between two complex cultures,

<sup>27</sup> This is part of a larger syndrome, which includes the rediscovery of culture as a globally marketable commodity. See for instance the papers in Carol A. Breckenridge (ed.), *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995).

Indian modernity has not only determined the exogenous elements that could be culturally integrated, but also the selection, redefinition, and rejection of traditions in a manner that would create a space for a modern nation-state in an ancient society.<sup>28</sup>

Firstly, over the entire nineteenth century, modernity conceptualised political authority as a stabilising, liberal instrument that could be used for social reform. The pro-British sentiments of the Indian élite in the last century were not so much due to the crumbs from the table of colonial exploitation they were collecting, though that is the way some narratives of the Indian nation-state go. These sentiments also grew out of the overlap or bonding between the Utilitarian sense of mission in sections of the British rulers and the Brahminic sense of mission in many Indians. True, this mutually reinforcing sense of a 'cause' was gradually destroyed by the supercilious arrogance of the rulers spawned by the quickening tempo of industrial and scientific changes in the West, the entry of culturally less secure and more defensive British middle-class elements into the ruling structures in India, and the consequent feelings of inferiority among Indians. Nonetheless, the old expectation that the state should be the major agent of social change persists. Much of Indian radicalism, led by Westernised upper- and middle-class ideologues, can be seen as a by-product of the vision of working with, and through, the colonial state towards a more humane society. Such radicalism has not betrayed the hopes of Indian liberal reformers of the nineteenth century whose support for, and expectations from, the state were often total.

Otherwise too, through the intermittent affairs with socialist, centralised models of social engineering, and by bringing charismatic authority within the government through people like Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, Indian politics has partly neutralised the Gandhian emphases on voluntary, non-governmental,

<sup>28</sup> Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedi, Achyut Yagnik and Shail Mayaram, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

reformist politics. This decline in voluntarism has been hastened by a psephocratic model of democratic participation where power is relinquished to 'elected kings', and the gradual emergence of professional politics dominated by previously marginalised social groups. Gandhi's voluntarism, on the other hand, has in recent decades found powerful self-expression outside party politics.

The entire enterprise of constructing an acceptable, central, political authority in India can be said to be related to the four strands of political culture—the four narratives of cultural politics—that seem to be rooted in four strata of Indian personality.

The first narrative invokes a period witnessing a growing awareness of the incipient Indian nation-state as a field of expanding economic and occupational opportunities for the traditional élite. One's deeper concepts of authority, hierarchy and power persisted but combined with an acquired taste in the white man's magic, including the totems of a proper nation-state, a homogenised national culture, and modern science and technology.

The second narrative binds feelings of personal or collective inferiority by projecting one's unacceptable self outwards—on to cultural and religious minorities, but even more importantly, towards the ordinary citizens seen as unworthy of the great civilisation they have by default inherited. To borrow the language of psychoanalysis, a major element in the style is the imagery of a motherland, by identifying with whose might one restores one's sense of infantile omnipotence. Deriving strength from some of the cultural myths centring around the mother, mother goddesses, and the feminine principle in the cosmos, this narrative serves as a defence against the ambivalence towards the first and only intimate, powerful, authority the traditional Indian has to cope with in a traditional Indian family, to construct paradoxically a hyper-masculine modern political authority system. One suspects that this narrative is doomed to chauvinist millennialism whenever the self-system is under pressure.

The third narrative is profoundly Gandhian, though its best

example is not Gandhi but two sets of his followers. One set seeks to tackle political problems as moral problems, sometimes showing doctrinaire, cramped conformity to pacifism and impulse-control, or searching for political potency through various forms of visible renunciation. The more the personal feelings of shame about 'impulse indulgence' that participation in the modern sector induces, the more the attempt to define political participation as a pursuit of moral goals. The style is mobilisational, emphasising conquest of the self and self-realisation and, ultimately, mobilisation of one's ideal self. (Ethno-nationalism is trying today to hijack a part of this narrative, too, though without any conspicuous success, partly because of the presence of strong androgynous elements in it.) The other set of followers builds on Gandhi but is not restrained overmuch by his historical presence. It works broadly within a Gandhian frame, but the specifics of ideology and strategies of intervention this set has forged are uniquely contemporary.<sup>29</sup>

The fourth narrative is closely linked to organisational skills, professional politics, and competitive mass politics. It demands a certain interpersonal competence and appeals to one's needs for achievement, competition and power. It taps a stratum of Indian personality not yet fully acceptable to either the traditional or the modern élite. For it rejects both ideological purism and social inflexibility and refuses to convert politics into a morality play. In fact, at times, it looks as if this narrative would like to do away with all the four narratives, to thereby unburden Indians of all shared memories that encumber 'pure' politics. Remembered pasts are relevant in this tradition only to the extent that they contribute to the pragmatics of contemporary life. However, what looks like cultivated amorality or 'peasant cunning' is often a desperate attempt to acquire and hold on to political power, seen as the only means of improving one's life chances, or for holding on to what looks like one's fragile middle- or upper-class status.

<sup>29</sup> Nandy, 'Gandhi After Gandhi'.

No story about India can end unambiguously, not even this one. Many would like to read the culture of Indian politics as an unfolding of the forces of modernisation and progress, as the consolidation of constitutional processes and citizenship. I think my narrative has made clear that the same culture can be read another way—as a record of the continuous updating of Indian traditions, and of their reappearance at the centre of Indian politics as a symbol of the political rights of a forgotten majority. This reading carries with it the awareness that there is an uneasy, if not inverse, relationship between democracy and modernisation in this part of the world. This is because of the way modernity has entered South Asia, riding piggyback on an oppressive colonial society to establish lasting bonds with the traditional stratarchies in society. But for that very reason, democratic politics in the region has broken loose from its European bonds with modernity, capitalism, and even the Enlightenment in order to become the highest court of appeal against the forms of injustice and indignity that come packaged in our times both as age-old cultural values and as new secular theories of emancipation.