

# Religion and Politics in Contemporary India

## The Complexities of Secularism and Communalism

(Study Material , for Long Question and Short notes)

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### Introduction

In August 1947, India was finally freed from its prolonged era under British colonial rule, winning independence, albeit as a self-governing member of the British Commonwealth. Independence, however, was accompanied by a very painful division into two separate states within its borders, the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. That separation became the source of great turmoil to follow in Indian history.

Independence itself did not involve bloody struggles with the former suzerain, Great Britain, but a series of hideous massacres occurred between Muslims and Hindus, who had lived together as

compatriots under British rule. Partition into the two independent states led to the largest-scale mass migration of religious groups in the history of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>1</sup> Muslim refugees headed for Pakistan, and Hindu and Sikh refugees for India. As they met midway, many cases of bloodshed occurred on a scale comparable to war.<sup>2</sup> This tragedy was caused when religion became linked with the modern territorial state. The dogmatism that brought about such conflict and disputes between religious groups has been called 'communalism' or religious confrontationism.

One may be inclined to think that 'communalism' between Hindus and Muslims has prevailed since Muslims took over India (dating back as far as the tenth century, during the Ghaznavid dynasty, when Muslims became the suzerains of northern India). As recent historical research has pointed out, however, there are strong indications that it was during the British colonial rule – that brought India into the modern age – that rigid boundaries were established between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the

unambiguous articulation of religious groups assumed primary importance under the modern governing system, and confrontation became palpable along those articulated lines.

Colonial rule brought unprecedented radical change and reorganization to the various societies it encountered in the Indian subcontinent. How to control many different peoples of the land and incorporate them into the structure of rule was the unavoidable task of the colonial administration. Over time, there emerged a public view of society that divided the peoples of India using religion and caste as the yardsticks of division. The division of people by religion, especially, was in accord with the Western-type secularism (separation of religion and politics) that, beginning with the separation of Church and State, constituted the basic policy of administration of colonial states. This political stance gave rise to a rigid communalism that split Muslims and Hindus. That was the source of 'the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism' in India, as shall be discussed later. This 'twisted relationship' continued even after Independence, and

still haunts people, causing new problems under the phenomenon of globalisation today. The aim of this paper is to present – while mindful of the modern period since the start of colonial rule – a framework for adequately understanding the thorny problem of contemporary communalism in India since the end of the twentieth century. There is no quick remedy for this extremely complex problem. What is important above all is a careful diagnosis of the problem, which will be the first step toward correct treatment. For such a diagnosis, it is imperative at first to precisely identify the problem.

### **Formation and Limitation of Secularism**

It is simplistic to describe the construction of modern (or colonial) India as a result of the one-way introduction of modern achievements of the West by the British. As Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>A</sup> has shown, Occident and Orient shaped the image of the self and the image of the other in their relationship of mutual reflection and, accordingly, created ruler-ruled ideas and institutions. The eighteenth century, when Britain began

controlling India, and the nineteenth century, when it won firm control of the territory, coincided with the time during which the West came to establish the ideology of rule by reason, or reason-centered thought.<sup>5</sup> The idea that even religion could be incorporated into the system of reason emerged in nineteenth-century currents of thought. It was also believed that reason brought progress, and that because the vessel of reason could breed anti-rational attitudes, it was the job of reason to choose between reasonable and unreasonable acts. This system of thought in the nineteenth century, when people lived within a reason-governing autistic space, represented a major philosophical shift from the eighteenth century, when reason was in its inception in milieus dominated by religion. The colonial era unfolded in these eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and as can readily be imagined, the Western experience of encounter with the non-western world worked as the experience of concretely corroborating the philosophical shift, that is, the establishment of reason-centered thought within the West. Reason with which to

ascertain a reason vs. anti-reason picture in its totality, is homologous with the transcendental quality of the 'knower' in 'Orientalism' as referred to by Said. It was produced simultaneously with the development of colonial rule over Asia and Africa. The separation of Church and State in the seventeenth-century West did not necessarily mean separation of the state as reason versus religion as antithetical to reason. It was not until the appearance of Hegel in the nineteenth century that the view of the state as the perfection of reason on earth was established (which led to the concept of state sovereignty). Only then did there come into being the idea that the state conducting politics and serving as the embodiment of judgement by reason, made possible the separation of politics and religion.

Philosophical change in the nineteenth century paved the way for market economy, democracy and secularisation in the twentieth century. Modern nation-states, thus, made it a basic policy to pursue separation of politics and religion.<sup>6</sup> In the name of modernisation, nation-states also took it for granted that

economic development and democracy were inseparable as the two wheels of a cart. Today, especially since the collapse of the Cold War structure, a good deal of soul-searching is going on about the once-firm conviction that the market-oriented capitalist system – a product of Western modernisation – would guarantee limitless progress. The increasingly felt impossibility of such progress has thrown the world into a deadlock. People now labour between the unwillingness to abandon the idea of progress and the reality of the earth's limited resources and irreversibility of environmental changes. This is not simply a matter of material limits. Post-World War II democracy, advocating freedom and equality for the individual, was undergirded by the ideology of progress, which became a device for continually putting off attainment of freedom and equality to a future time. Once doubts are raised about such democracy, the inequities and absence of freedom in reality loom up as unendurable. The people of the modern era who have sought their identity in never-ending growth and progress have been assaulted with the puncturing of

the growth myth with identity crisis and a wave of uncertainty. As if in response to a sense of deadlock of the times, religious revival movements have arisen and ethnic conflicts have flared in places throughout the world. The simplistic expectation that democracy would be attained and religion would go into decline have thus been frustrated. The advance of the era of reason has provoked anti-reason, igniting chaotic conditions in the form of religious and ethnic strife.

Under these circumstances, some advocate 'sustainable development' as the assurance for a soft-landing of development monism, but the challenge is how to come up with ideas and techniques of identity-building that are free from the established images of development. Seeing religious fundamentalism or revival as a threat to democracy, some call for cultural pluralism on the basis of the spirit of tolerance. But again, the challenge is, to what extent are the voices of anti-reason that demand attention for the communality to be heeded. These voices have long been suppressed by modernistic reason, and are closely related to



identity building. One must be aware, above all, that the problems we face today are so difficult that they cannot be solved by merely expedient revamping of modern reason and its applications. Modern reason views independent individuals as good and envisions a free society as made up of such individuals. But the fact is that such reason, in reality, suppresses people and leads them to turn away from freedom and bury themselves in communality. This irony, as represented by the rise of Nazism, is by no means a thing of the past. The foisting of reason upon people produces anti-reason, which strikes back. Calling this the 'other of reason' issue, I have addressed the significance of the problem elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> This is because I believe that we must face the difficult issues that have remained unresolved since the issue of 'overcoming the modern' (*kindai no chôkoku*) was proposed in the dangerous shape of fascism. Looking back over the past one hundred years, we can consider the twentieth century as a century of democracy versus fascism and light versus shadow. Post-World War II democracy, in the wake of the storm of fascism, "discarded

(fascism) as an 'irrational' ideology that would hobble the emergence of modern democratic states and independence."<sup>8</sup> In other words, "postwar democracy, while ignoring the trap of modern rationalism, its very premise, cast aside as irrational the legitimacy of addressing the challenge, though prematurely, by fascism to 'overcome the modern.'"<sup>9</sup> The concept of 'overcoming the modern' was discussed directly in the context of Japanese modern and contemporary history, but I think it can be applied much more generally. The religious 'fundamentalist' movements emerging in connection with politics in contemporary history, especially from the 1980s onward, can be seen as replay of fascism in the broad sense. This problem is not something we could settle by simply affirming or rejecting it. We must face it as an unsettled challenge for overcoming the modern. We must, moreover, conquer it as a philosophical challenge for building our individual identities. This 'other of reason' issue has to be seen as an objection to the market economy (development monism), democracy (civil society), and secularisation (rationalism), the

values taken for granted by modernisation advocates in the latter half of the twentieth century dreaming of limitless progress, values premised upon independent, reason-oriented individuals (persons whose identity is so strong that they can remain unperturbed even when isolated; such a way of living is actually impossible). What is called for today is the formulation of a more profound and more realistic image of humanity and society.

### **The Legacy of British Colonial Rule: Twisted Relations between Secularism and Communalism**

The problem identified in the previous section shows the essence of a thorny issue imbedded in the process beginning with the advent of British colonial rule in India, through the post-independence era, and continuing till today. This problem, in India's context, can be described as characterised by a twisted relationship between secularism and communalism. There is considerable debate over the usage and definitions of these terms, but this paper will not go into these matters in detail.<sup>10</sup> Suffice it here simply to call attention to two points. First,

viewing a different religious group as an enemy involves an attempt to absolutise religious differences, ignoring various other cultural elements, and the term communalism, which is translated as religious confrontationism, is valid as long as it discusses this subjective viewpoint.<sup>11</sup> Second, as for secularism, which means separation of religion and politics, studies have been done of the distinctively Indian usage of secularism that is different from secularism in its original Western sense, as well as of the distinction between secularism in its narrow, political sense and secularism with more positive implications.<sup>12</sup> The complex character of secularism is itself a topic of discussion in this paper. Neither of the two terms, communalism and secularism, can be used simplistically, but let me say in advance, that with such reservations, I use them to begin dealing with the essence of the issues facing modern Indian society. In this section, the paper focuses on how the contradictory structure of the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism was fundamentally formed during the British colonial era.

The British rule of India, beginning during the eighteenth-century enlightenment period, was fraught with internal conflict between the Orientalist stance of non-intervention (represented by the East India Company, rightist Tories), which affirmed the distinctiveness of Indian society and culture; and the Anglicist stance of intervention, which sought to universalise the values of British society and apply them to India (represented by evangelists, Utilitarians and free traders). Both shared some universalism, in that they primarily considered modern Western values to be superior. The Orientalists, however, were closer to cultural relativism than the Anglicists, because the former tried to understand the qualities inherent in Indian society, albeit in a distorted way. Implemented amid such discord between the two camps, actual colonial policy vacillated between intervention and non-intervention. The governing policy, therefore, was a compromise mix of 'transcendental' and 'inherent' standpoints.

The British colonial government's basic understanding of Indian society was expressed in its broad division of the Indian

population into Muslims, Hindus, and tribal peoples and further dividing the majority Hindus into castes.<sup>13</sup> Division between Muslims and Hindus according to religious differences; separation of tribal peoples from the Hindus as a result of the combining of the myth of the 'noble savage' with anti-Hinduism; and caste social stratification on the basis of the idea of Varna categories – in all these divisions, identity was provided through classification from above, the *transcendental* position of the ruler. Once the division was made, however, homogeneity of each group was assumed, and its objectification led to the creation of 'an imagined community' within the *inherent* viewpoint of each group.<sup>14</sup> There emerged a cultural pluralism in which standardised social customs were approved for each group, and it became necessary to deal with the new situation.

Specifically, the principle of personal law, respecting the customary law of each of the separate groups, was introduced to the courts by the Governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings, in 1772. This allowed the law of Hinduism to be applied to Hindus and the

law of Islam to apply to Muslims. Because, such customary law was made part of the framework of the modern judiciary, coordinating customary law and modern judicature later became a very difficult task. In other words, a contradictory structure of 'non-intervention within intervention' was incorporated on a practical level into the governing system. It should be kept in mind that relative independence was accorded to religious groups (as with the case of introduction of personal law) by the political philosophy of secularism that separated state politics from religion, as well as by the presence of the colonial ruler, Great Britain, as the pressure that kept inter-group violence from erupting. Serious contradictions thus became endemic, contradictions originating from transforming religious groups into social units and building a ruling structure on the basis of the separation of politics and religion. As long as relative independence was officially provided to religious groups, potential communalism was inevitably involved. This situation is

what this paper calls 'twisted relations between secularism and communalism.'

This framework, shaped by colonial rule, continued to primarily determine the social conditions of independent India in the post-colonial era. In that sense, we cannot summarily reject those who blame British colonial rule for the communalism plaguing India at the end of the twentieth century. It is a fact that during the colonial rule a possible path toward communalism was constructed.

Religion in pre-colonial, pre-modern society was naturally different from religion in the modern era, when separation between the spiritual and secular, between politics and religion, was promoted. Under the rule of pre-modern divine kingship, religion must have permeated the entirety of people's daily lives. In the modern period brought by colonial rule, by contrast, the diffusion of dualism that divided people's way of living into spiritual and secular made it possible to separate religion from worldly affairs and to see it at a certain distance. Religion, in other words, became an object of conscious manipulation and choice.



Here paradoxes occurred. At the time when the system dividing the Indian population into Hindus and Muslims – a system that made religion look as if it were the most important element of people's identity – became established, a secularisation of religion, that is, religion no longer coinciding with the entire identity of the people, was also in progress. Secularisation, needless to say, reduces religion to just a part of life. People are thus placed in a double bind religiously. They are suspended between the basic proposition of secularism – that religion should withdraw from government (a state that does not intervene in matters of religion) – and the proposition that religion is employed as the criterion for division into social groups (a state that intervenes in religion). In a secular state, a solution to this double-bind situation is generally to divide the life of a person into private life and public life, and to allot religion to private life. Implementation of this solution, however, inevitably leaves people with a sense of oppression, because it is unnatural that a person should draw such a clear line between the private and public aspects of life. In India, this general

solution can work all the less, because the official recognition of religious division is institutionalised. Thus, British colonial rule in India brought into being a secular state system which used religion institutionally for its own ends and in which it was difficult to maintain a balanced administration.

Through the medium of this double-bind state system, secularism paved the twisted path to communalism. The formidable problems that faced the anti-British nationalist movement that rose up for independence toward the end of the nineteenth century can be attributed to the nature of a secular state that utilised religion.<sup>15</sup> The problem was that anti-British nationalism was twisted into anti-Muslim communalism, as seen in the case of Hindu nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak.<sup>16</sup> The development of Indian nationalism proceeded side by side with the Hindu purification movement. This combination of nationalism with communalism was a projection of the victim consciousness that surfaced under British rule, and back to the time of the Muslim conquest of India. This stretch of imagination was basically

accelerated by the British policy of rule by religious division. It strengthened religious divisions to such an extent that nationalist leaders reacted sensitively to the demarcated religious borders of government and eventually led to Partition (independence of two separate states).

Let us outline, drawing on the work of Naitô,<sup>17</sup> the birth and growth of the Hindu nationalist forces that fought against Muslims under the anti-colonial movement. Stimulated by the Bengal Partition in 1905, a blatant manifestation of the colonial government's utilisation of religion, and by the formation in 1906 of the Muslim League, Hindus organised the Hindu Maha Sabha (HMS) in 1915 through the medium of the Punjab-Hindu Sabha set up in 1907. Initially, the HMS had close ties with the Indian National Congress Party, but in the 1920s it parted with the Congress, attacking Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi ((Mahatma Gandhi) and other Congress Party leaders' Muslim leanings (as exemplified by their approval of Muslim partition election and the development of the Khilafat Movement). Then, together with the Arya Samaj

('society of Aryans'), HMS launched a forceful re-conversion movement.

By that time, Hindu-Muslim communal conflicts had spread widely. Under these circumstances was born a communal organisation called Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or, literally, Association of National Volunteers) in September 1925. RSS was founded by K B Hedgewar and its philosophical basis was the idea of *sangatan* (organising), aimed at forging a unity among Hindus that sustained HMS. The idea is epitomised in *Hindutva* (The Essence of Hinduism), one of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's major works. The concept of *hindutva* is based on Hinduism, but goes beyond it. By 'Hindus', Savarkar means people born in the 'land of India' (Hindustan), who recognise the land as the holy place of their ancestors. They make up an ethnic entity united by the love for this common homeland and by common blood. The goal of the idea is, therefore, to establish the ethnic entity, Hindu *Rashtriyatva*. The *hindutva* doctrine defines Muslims, Christians and other 'heretical' minority groups as those whose

land of origin is elsewhere and who, therefore, cannot love the land of India, thereby providing communalists with a rationale for expelling them from Indian society. By extension of that rationale, it came to be argued that if they remained in India, they could not be on an equal footing with Hindus.

The RSS, which defined itself as a cultural organisation, expanded to 500 local branches with a total of 60,000 members by the end of the 1930s. Many (most) RSS activists were upper caste members and middle-class people in urban areas. In 1940, Hedgewar died and M S Golwalkar became president, and the RSS movement directed its efforts toward Indian independence. In 1941, in rivalry with Hindu nationalist activities like those of the RSS, a Muslim communal organisation, the Jamaat-e-Islami, was established. The development and radicalisation of such communalism eventually resulted in Partition. The Partition was particularly humiliating to Hindus, whose sense of communalism was strong, based on their reverence for the entire land of India as Hindustan. Indian independence, thus, left in its wake further heightened

communalism, for the presence of Muslims within India after Partition always reminds Hindu nationalists of the humiliating sense they bitterly felt at the time of independence, and of their powerlessness.

It should be kept in mind that resistance in the form of anti-colonial movements are apt to follow the framework of the governing structure. Resistance activists thus tend to form their organisations along the lines of religious divisions when the ruling side utilises religion, and along the lines of caste divisions when the ruling side utilises the caste system. As in the case of the escalation of Hindu nationalism from anti-British to anti-Muslim, the energy of resistance accepts group divisions from above and assumes an immediate foe therein, projecting a false image. Consciously or unconsciously, politicians make effective use of this mechanism of false projection in mobilising people. This is how ideologised religion encouraged by nationalism takes shape.

Amid the dynamic intersection of differences between religious groups, between castes, and between regions (languages), anti-

colonial nationalism has been twisted in various ways. To cite but one easily visible example in history is sufficient to surmise the complexity of the situation. Westernised Indian elites, who received their education in Britain, experienced inner struggle over the question of how to build India as an independent modern state against colonial forces. Jawaharlal Nehru is an example *par excellence*. A man whose mind worked like a modern Western rationalist, Nehru must have been annoyed by his spiritual attraction to Mahatma Gandhi, who seemed irrational, even unrealistic. Things were complicated because Gandhi was torn within himself between ideal and reality and between Hindus and Muslims. Such inner split developed in the face of the twisted secularism-communalism relations that were rooted in the double-bind governing structure discussed earlier. Those twisted relations were carried over to post-independence India, and have been reproduced.

## Religion and Politics in Post-independence India: Communalism Today

When the Indian Constitution came into force on January 26, 1950, India became a republic and the Congress Party came to power with Nehru as India's Prime Minister. A great challenge for independent India was how to cope with the volatile situation caused by continuation of the social structures based on castes and religious division established under the colonial rule, once the colonial weight from above, which had kept violence from erupting among different groups, was lifted.

The political history of India after World War I has been divided by Hiroshi Satô into three periods: the first period, leading up to independence in 1947; the second period from 1947 to the fourth general election thereafter, held in 1967, in which the Congress Party suffered a crushing defeat; and the third period from then onward.<sup>18</sup> According to Satô, the first period can be represented by Mahatma Gandhi, the second by Jawaharlal Nehru, and the third by Indira Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent advocate of *swaraj* (home rule) for India, mediated between radicals demanding early independence and moderates who attached more importance to social reform, and succeeded in involving not only the urban middle class



but *kisans* (peasants) in the nationalist movement. He also played a leading role in expanding the support base of the Indian National Congress Party, organised as an appeasement measure under colonial rule, into a nation-wide organisation of Indians themselves.<sup>19</sup> Through the Congress Party, the three classes – peasants, middle class, and capitalists – united forces, paving the way for a system of parliamentary democracy led by the Congress Party in post-independence India. Gandhi himself, however, saw the realities of post-independence Congress Party politics as anti-democratic and called for reform to nurture a Lok Sevak Sangh (People's Voluntary Service Association). However, in 1948, amid the upsurge of communal sentiments in the wake of the Partition, he was fatally shot by a young man who belonged to the RSS, the Hindu communalist organisation.

Built on the legacy of the first period was the 'Nehru democracy' of the second period (which was launched after the Congress Party's victory in the first general election in 1952). There were two major factors that sustained the Indian people's dreams for democracy, development, and progress during this period: the presence of a social consensus for nation building through modernisation and the practical possibility of realising a

socialist society embodied in a mixed economy. Because of this consensus and vision, in the early stages of independence, India was able to deal with the issue of communalism with relative ease, bringing it under control.

In the third period, communalism-prompted riots quickly became widespread under the influence of the second and third India-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971, on the one hand, and strife between the Congress Party and the Janata Party, on the other. The Jan Sangh (JS, literally, People's Association; formed in 1951), the predecessor of the Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, literally, Indian People's Party, formed in 1980) joined the Janata Party, in power between 1977 and 1980 after an overwhelming victory in the 1977 election over the Congress Party led by Indira Gandhi. The merging of the Jan Sangh and the Janata Party was a result of the fact that the RSS, which had remained a cultural organisation until the end of the term of its second president Golwalkar, began to actively engage in political activities under its third president M D Deoras. The RSS also has close ties with the religious organisation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), organised in 1964 as a union of India-wide Hindu groups aimed at strengthening the bonds of Hindu society at home and abroad. The emergence of diverse Hindu

communalist groups, mainly during the third period, forming what is known as the Sangh Parivar (RSS Family) centring on the RSS, VHP, and BJP, was not unrelated to the outbreak of frequent communal riots. A communal incident that symbolised the period was occasioned by the massive conversion to Islam of former untouchables in the village of Minakshipuram, in the State of Tamil Nadu in southern India, in February 1981. In response, a Hindu communalist organisation in the Tamil area linked to the Sangh Parivar launched a movement to convert them back to Hinduism. This case indicates the early pattern in which Hindu communalist organisations began to spread throughout India.

To bring the account up-to-date to the present day, we may add one more period to Sato's three-period scheme. This is the period of communalism we see today. The events that ushered in the fourth period occurred between 1984, when Indira Gandhi was assassinated (igniting communal clashes between Hindus and Sikhs mainly in the capital city of New Delhi) and her son Rajiv Gandhi succeeded her as Prime Minister, and 1989, when the Cold War structure collapsed. In terms of the domestic political phenomena of contemporary India, the fourth-period upsurge of communalism is characterised by the political instability caused by the rise

of Hindu nationalists coinciding with the advent of the multi-party era following the end of prolonged single-party rule by the Indian National Congress Party. That upsurge can also be seen, in broader perspective, as linked to the religious revitalisation sweeping the world today. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution marked the starting point of the religious revival movement that is often called Islamic fundamentalism. In India around that time, after the Indira Gandhi administration lost in the 1977 election, the Janata Party was in power. This indicates that the dreams of modernisation and the forces of political ideology were completely frustrated as the third period came to an end. In that sense, one can say that India entered an era of 'reflexive\_modernisation' – to paraphrase sociologist Ulrich Beck – contrasting with the 'simple modernisation' of the Nehru democracy period that Indians had pursued while they shared the belief in socialism and modernisation. In the unsettled period of reflexive modernisation,<sup>20</sup> as people began realising that their dreams were illusory, the insecure and delicate relationship between religion and politics began to take belligerent forms. In other words, the contradictory structure inherent in the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism began to resurface in new forms.

On December 6, 1992, riots fanned by BJP and other Jan Sangh members destroyed the Babri Masjid (Babri mosque, built by the first Mughal emperor Babur) in Ayodhya, the sacred birthplace of Hindu deity Rama. This means that, although the Hindu-Muslim confrontation over the holy city of Ayodhya had already begun during the colonial period, Hindu nationalists took the dangerous, dramatic first step toward communalism that we see currently. The incident was widely reported in the media and was instantly known within and outside India, sparking violent reactions in various areas, including Bombay (now Mumbai). In Bombay, two major waves of riots followed the toppling of the Babri Masjid. The first, which flared as a more-or-less spontaneous reaction, only a day later, lasted until December 17, 1992, leaving 227 people dead. The second case of violence, which occurred the following year, March 12, 1993, was planned in advance and the toll was much higher (approximately 500 dead). This series of communal riots provided a decisive turning point. The crescendo of communalism and the crisis of secularism became a serious plague in India. Notwithstanding, the BJP, the political arm of the Jan Sangh, rapidly increased its support base in the 1990s, and eventually took over the central government in 1998, albeit by allying itself with other parties.

Hindu nationalists have long been hostile, primarily towards Muslims, but over the last several years, their offensive against Christians has grown intense as well.<sup>21</sup> More recently, their attacks on Christians in the State of Gujarat, commencing towards the end of year 1998, drew much attention, and all of India was shocked when an Australian missionary and his two children were killed on the night of January 22, 1999, in a village in the State of Orissa.<sup>22</sup> These incidents seem to be the result of fervour for expulsion of minority religious groups deemed strangers in the holy land of India, probably inspired by the ideology of *hindutva*. The idea alone, however, cannot fully explain why Christians are targets of Hindu attacks at present. Anger on the part of Hindus over conversion of Indians to Christianity may be one reason, but it cannot be the complete answer. Their attacks on Christians cannot be sufficiently explained on the grounds of advancing their noble cause. Dipankar Gupta argues that Muslims and Sikhs, who once suffered Hindu assaults without much resistance, are now fighting back, making the defenceless and weak Christians easier targets of Hindu rage. Naming VHP, RSS, and Bajrang Dal among others, he asserts that such Hindu nationalist fanatics, who kill but avoid self-sacrifice, should be distinguished from fundamentalists who are ready to die for great causes.

He denounces the corruption of VHP leaders, mentioning them by name, and declares that they have grown jealous and frustrated because of their inability to fulfil their own ideals. They are quick to identify objects of harassment in an attempt to justify their inglorious lives by sacrificing others. Gupta's analysis is helpful in attempting to understand the communalism of today. His view echoes Ashis Nandy's assertion that communalism, contrary to its superficial appearance, is moving further and further away from religion in the true sense.<sup>23</sup> Gupta's distinction between fanatical nationalists and fundamentalists is close to Nandy's distinction between 'religion as ideology,' that is a communalist sense of religion, on the one hand and 'religion as faith' that comes alive in people's everyday lives, on the other.<sup>24</sup> It is also similar to the contrast Imtiaz Ahmad sees between communalism and religion.<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt that in Nandy's mind, 'religion as ideology' is associated with the communalism of the Jan Sangh and 'religion as faith' with religion as aspired to by Mahatma Gandhi. Be that as it may, what is the crucial issue posed by today's daily intensifying communalism?

### **Misunderstanding of the Communalism vs. Secularism Scheme**

Worried about the current upsurge of communalism, many argue that secularism should be protected in order to defend democracy. This approach, needless to say, places communalism in antithesis to secularism. But can such an approach really give us any insight about the future? Can it deal soundly with the problems thrust before us by the tide of religious revivalism and communalism today?

There are facts that undermine the conventional view that secularism and communalism are at opposite poles. Attainment of 'genuine secularism' is included among the planks of the ruling BJP government agenda. Some may say that such a statement should be ignored because it is simply part of the glib rhetoric of politicians. But it is quite intriguing: a communalist party advocating 'genuine secularism.' What circumstances does this paradoxical rhetoric reflect? One is forced to re-examine the relationship between secularism and communalism, which on the surface seem to be opposites, because the former calls for separation of religion and politics and the latter for unity of religion and politics.

To state my conclusion at the outset, it may be argued that the difference between the two positions is not one between dualistic elements that have



nothing in common, but a distinctive opposition between two elements that share the same ground, like the binary opposition of structuralism.<sup>26</sup> If that is so, it is not without reason that the BJP advocates 'genuine secularism.' Let me elucidate this in detail. In the secularism-communalism confrontation, it does appear that culturally relativistic secularism, which refrains from making judgements about religious values, is threatened by an absolutist communalism that asserts a specific religion as a universal value. In actuality, however, both secularism and communalism have a relative understanding of the coexistence of various religious groups in the world, and are premised upon a modern consciousness of homogeneous space that allows the drawing of a sectional religious map. In other words, epistemologically, both secularism and communalism are relativistic. In that sense, they share a secularised understanding of the world, a modern thought that enables them to view religion as an object, that is, to separate religion from politics. It is on this shared ground that the differences of secularism from communalism must be considered.

The difference is found at the level of value judgements. Secularism embraces moral relativism while communalism takes the stance of moral absolutism. The latter approach leads to separatism, abandoning any

constructive effort at internalised or empathetic understanding of others. The narrow-minded separatism of communalism is a product of the marriage of epistemological relativism and moral absolutism. Seen in this way, the BJP's 'genuine secularism' can be interpreted as follows: 'secularism' indicates secular epistemological relativism and 'genuine' means moral absolutism as expressed in the idea of *hindutva*. The phrase in the BJP's government agenda, therefore, can be considered a very candid expression of the BJP's ideology. Theoretically (due to its relativist position), it is impossible to easily add 'genuine' to secularism, because this would throw secularism into a very difficult position *vis-à-vis* communalism.

Partha Chatterjee, for example, points out that, because right-wing Hindus do not challenge the idea of a secular state, they cannot be denounced as a means of defending secularism. Generally, secularism has two constituent aspects:

1. the modern state is strictly separated from religion; and
2. the modern state always observes a neutral stand toward religion.<sup>27</sup>

Especially in India, where religious groups are utilised in the official structure of society, the second aspect of secularism arises as a realistic problem in dealing with strife among religious groups. Communalism, which takes tactical advantage of these two aspects of secularism, is hard to bring under control. In an extreme case, when a majority religious group takes the helm of national government, it can suppress minority religious groups in the name of a modern state.

The situation may be easier to understand by looking at Imtiaz Ahmad's discussion, which rejects the belief that communalism and secularism are in direct opposition, and astutely argues that the real discord is between religion and communalism as mentioned above.<sup>28</sup> In Ahmad's view, the state-religion relationship as stipulated in the Indian Constitution is a product of the 'compromise' of two constituent aspects of secularism (a compromise that is not necessarily negative). Secularism as defined in the Constitution connotes two simultaneous positions (stipulations). From the viewpoint of the early-Nehru-style or Western-style secularism, it states that the government is separated from religion (referred to hereafter as stipulation A); on the one hand, and, from a Gandhi-style standpoint, it

states that the central government equally supports all religions (referred to hereafter as stipulation B).<sup>29</sup>

There is a possibility that the two positions may make different assertions relying on these stipulations as their basis of argument, and because of this possibility, it is necessary to identify a point of compromise. In other words, the first position (stipulation A) may lead to an assertion that the nation's goal should be to make it possible for people, regardless of religious difference, to have equal duties and rights under non-religious, unified laws. This stance is oriented toward unification, giving consideration to people before religious groups. The second position (stipulation B), on the other hand, tends toward pluralism, approving the existence of any religious group (religious community) and granting them the right to pursue their respective creeds and practices. Although this stance guarantees freedom of religion, it also reserves room for the interpretation that religious groups may come before the people affiliated with them. The two opposite stipulations, one oriented toward unification of the state and the other toward religious pluralism, coexist in the Indian Constitution. Religious groups have tried to utilise this compromise constitution to their

own advantage, and that, argues Ahmad, is the history of independent India.

A serious problem arises when a majority religious group takes advantage of the law, as is the case with the issue over adoption of the uniform civil code. The results completely differ, depending upon whether the uniform civil code subordinates 'stipulation B' to 'stipulation A' or subordinates 'stipulation A' to 'stipulation B'. The former would be attainment of law as a forging of consensus among religious groups, an ideal desired in the materialisation of secularism in the future, while the latter corresponds to the behaviour of communalists who forcefully and hastily demand a uniform civil code.

A case in point is the advocacy of a uniform civil code by the nationalist BJP, whose support base is made up of majority Hindus. The party tries to utilise the two stipulations to its advantage, with emphasis on 'stipulation B', and seeks to make the voices of Hindus sound like the voice of the Indian nation. This position exploits two misguided attitudes. One is seen in the tendency to utilise officially accepted religious divisions so as to advance the views of some nationalists as if they represented Hindus in

general. The other is in introducing the idea of *hindutva* to assert the association of Hinduism with the Indian state. This is how the phoney phrase 'genuine secularism' came into being. As discussed thus far, it is clear that the contradictory structure of a secular state made up of religion-based social groups – 'the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism' – cannot be rectified from the simplistic perspective of secularism versus communalism.

### **The De-Modernization Dilemma: 'Religion and Human Life' Reconsidered**

Assuming that the secularism–communalism confrontation is not a real problem to be tackled, then where does the real problem lie? To find it out, Ahmad focuses on the difference between 'religion' and 'communalism,' as mentioned earlier. The importance of this shift or leap in perspective lies in seeing the twisted relationship between secularism and communalism as revealing the limits of the modern system (perceptions and institutions). That is to say, placing 'communalism' as antithetical to 'religion' is oriented toward the overcoming of the modern-de-modernisation – as is Nandy's distinction between 'religion as ideology' and 'religion as faith.' The approach is derived from the anticipation that an emphasis on the defence

of secularism alone may fail to resolve the real problem of 'overcoming the modern,' the issue addressed by communalism, and may suppress the problem and delay its solution.

In the sense that the urgent issue of anti-communalism is understood in greater depth as necessary for de-modernisation, the perspective from which this paper tries to address the problem is very close to that of Ashis Nandy. Nandy is often criticised as an anti-modernist, but if one grasps his true meaning, one may well call him a spokesperson for de-modernisation. In Nandy's view, secularism, together with democracy, are part of the greater Western modernist project, and communalism came into being as the evil by-product of Western modernism or secularism, namely as the shadow delineating the limits of modernism. Nandy says that the shadow is especially evident, not among the elite or the lower classes, but among the middle class. This is because the middle class has experienced the most drastic social changes with the globalisation of the economy and information.<sup>30</sup>

In the face of the phenomena of communalism, people of the modern era, who were taught of the dangers of allowing religion into the official arena

because it might be incapable of carrying on rational argument, usually think it advisable to return to the secularism that confines religion to the private realm. While cognisant of this danger, Nandy emphasises that it is time to abandon that approach. The modern cannot conceal the defects of the modern. As discussed in this paper, post-independence India, which sought to modernise itself, adopted Western-style secularism as a basic policy. It is becoming evident that adherence to this basic principle has not had the expected result, and it is time to face this problem squarely, because in reality religion enters into the official realm from the back door in the form of communalism.<sup>31</sup> According to Nandy's analysis, the actual situation in which religion can be officially talked about only via the back door under Western-style secularism works to aggravate the feelings of frustration and helplessness of the religious faithful and fuels fanaticism among them. He emphasises that the fundamental path for dissolving the phenomenon of communalism is to adequately meet the needs of those who cannot but enter through this back door. Because communalism, or religion as ideology, was the result of the attempt to seal off religion with Western-style secularism, dualistic approaches such as politics versus religion, or secular versus spiritual, will not work. It is crucial to build a path



of tolerance and harmony by attaching more importance to 'religion as faith' that embraces the entirety of people's everyday lives. For Nandy, an advocate of the de-modernisation project, this both anti-secularist and anti-communalist proposal also means a call for fundamental reforms in the way the modern state system has clung to science and development.<sup>32</sup>

Outward appearances aside, the phenomena of communalism today have grown less and less religious in the true sense and grown more and more secular. As Nandy sees it, contemporary Hindu nationalists (communalists) are secular modernists who manipulate 'religion as ideology,' as for example the concept of *hindutva*. They are like merchants dealing in packaged Hinduism (as opposed to a packaged Islam), making ideology a uniformly standardised commercial commodity. 'Religion as faith,' on the other hand, is religion as it shaped the Indian life style before such modernisation or secularisation. Religion in that sense is not self-righteous or monolithic, but pluralistic in practice. Religion in this sense is premised not upon the rigid and close-minded individual but upon the mobile and open-minded individual, and has its own principles about tolerance and intolerance.

By introducing the above distinction into religion, Nandy clearly shows:

1. it is difficult (for Indian people at least) to imagine human life that rejects the presence of religion; and
2. the highly flexible religious tradition that once endowed human life with the meaning of life is actually abused as an ideology for secular benefit.

By separating the two different types of religion, he calls for conscious efforts to explore and restore the profound meaning of 'religion as faith.'

From this dimension, he urges reestablishment of religious tolerance so that all religions can respect one another.

Among Indian intellectuals, many criticise the Nandy-style anti-modernism as an anachronistic throw-back to Mahatma Gandhi, declaring that modern secularism itself should be strengthened. (In fact, these people are Nandy's targets, and *vice versa*.) They are essentially advocates of Nehru-style secularism based on Western-style secularism, but it is also true that they feel acutely the necessity to rectify the defects of secularism and reinvigorate it. They reflect that Nehru-style secularism and Congress Party politics, propelled by favourable circumstances of the times, grew

transcendental and dogmatic, failing to develop the pluralism that allows for constructive dialogue among different groups. That failure resulted in the deadlock and decline of the Congress Party-led politics that had sustained Indian democracy. Despite such reflection, they (Amartya Sen, for example) argue that as long as there is no better alternative, secularism cannot easily be abandoned. From this viewpoint, they are concerned that the Nandy-like stance of criticising secularism and communalism at the same time may turn out to support the communalists' criticism of Congress Party secularism.

This concern is somewhat understandable, but is a totally off-the-mark criticism of Nandy. An attempt to explore the intersection of modern reformists and de-modernists, like Rajeev Bhargava's work, is valuable, but the reason this paper devotes much space to Nandy's argument is because its author believes that, unless people change their perceptions so as to awaken thinking and the institutions bound by the spell of the modern, it will be impossible to attain a forum of plurality where dialogue to bridge the gap between the self and others is made possible.

In that sense, this author's interpretation of Nandy's argument is different from that of the advocates of modernist secularism. Modern reformists, who try to act within the framework of modern secularism, tend to criticise Nandy's approach as a revivalist anachronism, seeing his division of religion into two types as an attempt to contrast Western modernity with Indian tradition. But, this is a very shallow understanding of Nandy.

The distinction between *hindutva*, which is 'religion as ideology,' and Hinduism in the realm of people's everyday life ('religion as faith'), can be expressed as follows, borrowing literary critic Karatani Kojin's analytical concepts, 'individuality as particularity' ('I' that can be compared with others) and 'individuality as singularity' (the 'none other than I' that cannot be compared with others).<sup>33</sup> It is possible to make a distinction between 'religion as particularity,' in which religions can be compared and often used as a means of discrimination, and 'religion as singularity,' in which the differences of the secular 'costumes' worn by religions are meaningless, and only deep faith in the absolute other, regardless of religious differences, is focused upon. The latter, or 'religion as singularity,' can only exist on the peripheral border of the social space of secular modern society, where 'religion as ideology' is dominant. Only there, does the world of faith

open to others, and , which should be the core of religion, unfold. This is because, that place borders on the outside (the other). On the surface, the place seems to be where 'traditional' or 'indigenous' culture is being lost under the impact of a dominant culture. But in fact, the place is where the closed space of modern secular society borders on the outside. It is the scene of plurality where 'dialogue' is possible between the self and others, and 'tolerance' (not that advocated by modern humanism) that belongs in Nandy's 'religion as faith' can be materialised.

The passions of communalism are erupting on the oppressive periphery of the modern secular social space dominated by reason. This is occurring in reaction to the act of attempting to immediately throw into the secular prison of reason (closed space) all encounters with the outside (the other of reason), which results in violence and sacrifices of the other. At the same time, this volatile peripheral place is the very place where it is possible to reform the modern, a place suitable for thinking about the 'other of reason.' In other words, the place where communalism is occurring can become a place where a homicidal religion is transformed into religion that brings people alive. When violence that sacrifices others in the name of religion is transformed into acts of the self-sacrifice which is the core of

faith, it will become a force that makes people spontaneously accept others. Nowhere, except at this border (periphery) where reason encounters the outside, can such genuine faith emerge.

The realities of human existence now challenge the validity of modernity, under which it has been believed that reason can control even religion. The phenomena of communalism can be interpreted as an immature form of the challenge. The issues they raise seem unclear and even retrogressive, but what is called for now is reform of perceptions that will allow people to firmly grasp the true meaning of those issues. This paper is a step toward that reform.