Lecture No. 16
The Idea of India[1]
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When, some months ago, "the idea of India" was agreed on as the title of my Nehru Lecture, I had not imagined that the subject would be as topical as it, alas, has become through the terrible events of recent months. The idea of a secular India, tolerant of different religions (and of none), which had been taken for granted since independence, has been severely damaged by extremist Hindu political groups. The present round of events began on the 6th of December with the destruction of a sixteenth century mosque (the Babri Masjid)) in the northern city of Ayodhya, by politically organised mobs of activist Hindus, who want to build a temple to Rama on that very spot. That outrageous event has been followed by communal violence and riots across the country, in which thousands have perished – both Hindus and Muslims, but Muslim victims have far outnumbered Hindus. Some of the worst incidents have taken place in Bombay, usually thought to be the premier city of India.

The extremist Hindu political movement that spearheaded the present turmoil has gone on to demand an official end to Indian secularism, to be replaced by the recognition of India as a Hindu state. This proposal, if accepted, would involve a dramatic alteration of one of the basic principles of the Indian constitution, and a radical departure from the idea of India – a pluralist, tolerant and secular India – that was part and parcel of the Indian nationalist movement and which was reflected in the legal and political structure of independent India. It is that idea and the challenges it faces that I want to discuss.

Secularism as a part of pluralism
At one level it seems extraordinary that a mainly passive idea like secularism can be such a central tenet in the conception of modern India. Is secularism really an important issue, or is it just sanctimonious rhetoric that hallows the political shenanigans in India? When British India was partitioned, Pakistan chose to be an Islamic Republic, whereas India chose a secular constitution. Is that distinction significant?

The distinction is certainly important from the legal point of view, and its political implications are also quite extensive. This applies to different levels of political and social arrangements, going all the way up to the headship of the state. For example, unlike Pakistan, the constitution of which requires that the head of the state must be a Muslim, India imposes no comparable requirement, and the country has had non-Hindus (including Muslims and Sikhs) as Presidents and as holders of other prominent and influential offices in government.

But secularism is, in fact, a part of a more comprehensive idea – that of India as an integrally pluralist country, constitutively made up of different religious beliefs, distinct language groups, divergent social practices Secularism is one aspect – a very important one – of the recognition of that larger idea of heterogeneous identity. I shall argue, later on in the paper, that the sectarian forces that want the demolition of Indian secularism have to come to terms not merely with the massive presence and rights of Muslims in India, but also with her regional, social, cultural, and other diversities. Toleration of differences is not easily divisible.

Muslims in India

Are the Muslims marginal in the Indian population? Even though four out of five persons in India are formally Hindu, it still has well over a hundred million Muslims, not far short of Pakistan, and rather larger than Bangladesh. Indeed, seen in this perspective, India is the third largest Muslim country in the world. The idea of seeing India just as a Hindu country is fairly bizarre in the face of that fact alone, not to mention the extensive linkages between Hindu and Muslim lives.[2]

The religious plurality of India also extends far beyond the Hindu-Muslim question. There is, of course, a large and prominent Sikh population, and a substantial number of Christians, going back all the way to the 4th century A.D. (considerably earlier than Britain had any Christians). As a matter of fact, India also has had Jewish settlements from shortly after the fall of Jerusalem. Parsees have moved to India from less tolerant Iran. There are also millions of Jains and practitioners of Buddhism, which had been, for a long period, the official religion of many of the Indian emperors (including the great Ashoka). Furthermore, the number of people who are atheist or agnostic (as Jawaharlal Nehru himself was) is large too, though the census categories do not record actual religious beliefs – only the community background.

The framers of the Indian constitution wanted to make sure that the state would not take a biased position in favour of any particular community or religious conviction. Given the heterogeneity of India and of the Indians, there is no real alternative to secularism that would be even half fair.

Diversities within Hinduism
The issue of religious plurality does not relate only to the relationship between Hindus and followers of other faiths (or none). It also relates to the diversity within Hinduism itself. If it is to be seen as one religion, Hinduism cannot but be taken to be thoroughly plural in structure. The divisions are not connected only with caste (though that is tremendously important too), but also with schools of thought. Even the ancient classification of "six systems of philosophy" had acknowledged deeply diverse beliefs and reasoning. More recently, when the 14th century Sanskrit scholar, Madhava Acarya, wrote his famous *Sarvadarsana Samgraha* ("collection of all philosophies"), he devoted sixteen chapters to as many different schools of Hindu religious postulates (beginning with the atheism of the Carvaka school), and he discussed how each religious school, within the capacious body of Hindu thought, differed from the others.

Indeed, seeing Hinduism as one religion, in fact, is a comparatively recent development. The term Hindu had originally been used mainly as a signifier of location and country, rather than one of homogeneity of religious beliefs. The term derives from the river Indus (the cradle of the Indus valley civilization going back to 3000 BC), and that river is also the source of the word India itself. The Persians and the Greeks saw India as the land around and beyond the Indus, and Hindus were the native people of that land. Muslims, in Persian as well as Arabic, and there are plenty of references in early British documents to "Hindoo Muslims" and "Hindoo Christians", to distinguish them respectively from Muslims and Christians from outside India.

Ramayana and Rama
Plurality is an internal characteristic of Hinduism as a religion; it is not just a matter of external relation between Hindus and non-Hindus in the secular polity of India. The Hindu activists who demolished the 16th century mosque in Ayodhya, wanting a temple to Rama instead, have to come to terms with the fact that even among those who see themselves as religious Hindus, very many would actually differ on the subject of Rama's divinity (not to mention his pre-eminent divinity).

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[2] On the importance of anthropological understanding in seeing the need for secularism, see the powerful analysis of Nur Yalman, "*On Secularism and its Critics: Notes on Turkey, India and Iran,*" *Contributions to India Sociology*, 25 (1991)

Certainly, in parts of the country the name of Rama is identified with divinity. Ironically, perhaps the most famous invoking, in recent times, of the name of Rama (or "Ram", as the word is more often pronounced in contemporary Hindi) as synonymous with God took place when Mahatma Gandhi was shot and killed on January 30, 1948, by a Hindu extremist, belonging to a political group not totally dissimilar to the ones that destroyed the mosque last December. The leader of modern India, who was a deeply religious Hindu but whose secular politics had earned him the wrath of the extremist zealots, fell to the ground, hit by a Hindu bullet, saying "Hé Ram!".

The identification of Rama with divinity is common in north and west India, but elsewhere (for example, in my native Bengal), Rama is mainly the hero of the epic *Ramayana*, rather than God incarnate. *Ramayana* as an epic is, of course, widely popular everywhere in India, and has been so outside India as well – in Thailand and Indonesia for example (even Ayutthaya, the historical capital of Thailand is cognate of Ayodhya). But we have to distinguish the influence of the epic *Ramayana* – a wonderful literary achievement – from the particular issue of divinity.

One of the Hindu political leaders present at the demolition of the mosque, described the destruction, with evident reverence as "Hanuman's mace at work" (referring to the monkey king Hanuman who was an ally of Rama, as told in epic *Ramayana*). It no doubt appeared to him like that, but he can scarcely ignore the fact that Hanuman does not generate much reverence among hundreds of millions of Hindus in many other parts of India, nor the fact that in popular plays in, say, rural Bengal, hanuman is a riotously comic character – affable, amusing, and wholly endearing, but scarcely endowed with any holiness. Indeed, in his *Vision of India's History*, Rabindranath Tagore separates out the epic hero Rama for special praise precisely because Rama, as Tagore put it, "appeared as divine to the primitive tribes, some of whom had the totem of monkey, some that of bear".[3]

Thus, the religious differences between Hindus and Muslims cannot be dissociated from the diversities within Hinduism and between regions in India. That regional variation applies to modern politics as well. Indeed, even in terms of electoral politics, the strength of the Hindu political party, Bharatiya Janata party – BJP for short – is largely confined to the north and west of India, with rather little support from the eastern and southern states. Of the BJP members of Indian parliament chosen in the last election, more than ninety per cent came from just eight states and union territories in the north and west of India (more than forty per cent from one state – the large Uttar Pradesh – alone), out of a total of thirty-two states and union territories spread across India (twenty of which returned no BJP members at all). If the religious distinctions within the country are striking, so are the sharp regional contrasts. Pluralism has to deal with both features and they cannot be dissociated from each other.

Difficult and Unresolved issues
There is not much alternative to secularism as an essential part of overall pluralism, in the comprehensive politics of modern India. This does not, however, indicate that the secular approach is trouble free. Secularism can indeed take different forms and there is much scope for discussing which form it should take. One of the problems with secularism as it is practiced in India is that it has been interpreted as demanding the sum-total of the intolerances of the different communities, rather than the union of their respective tolerances. Anything that causes the wrath of any of the major communities in India is taken to be a potential candidate for banning. This trigger-happiness with proscription sites uncomfortably with India's otherwise good record on the lack of press censorship.

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[3] Rabindranath Tagore, *A Vision of India's History* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1951, reprinted 1962, p.32)

For example, India was the first country to outlaw the distribution of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, reacting well before the Iranian authorities took notice (and came in with their murderous programme). There are other examples of an eagerness to respond to the union of the diverse irritabilities of the different Indian communities. This does not lead to a tolerant society.

The situation in this regard might be compared with the issue of blasphemy in modern Britain. The United Kingdom remains formally Christian in having an anti-blasphemy law related only to Christian beliefs. There are demands in Britain to extend these blasphemy prohibitions to cover the beliefs of other religions as well. One way of having a symmetrical position *vis-à-vis* the different religions practiced in modern Britain would be to do just that. But another would be to scrap all the blasphemy laws altogether. A secular state could choose to move in either of the two symmetric directions, but those who believe that a modern society that respects free speech should prefer doing away with anti-blasphemy laws in general (rather than clamping them on all around), must demand something more than just secular symmetry. These issues remain to be more fully addressed in modern India – and also, I might add, in modern Britain.

A second question relates to the fact that the Indian interpretation of secularism includes some legal asymmetries between the different communities, related to their respective personal laws. For example, while a Hindu can be prosecuted for polygamy, a Muslim man can have up to four wives, in line with what is taken to be the Islamic legal position (even though, in practice, that provision is very rarely invoked by Indian Muslims). There are also other asymmetries, for example, between the provision for wives in the event of a divorce, where, too, Muslim women – in line with a certain reading of Islamic law – have less generous guarantees than Hindu women do. The existence of these asymmetries has been cited again and again by Hindu political activists to claim that Hindus, as the majority community, are discriminated against in India. This is of course a ridiculous charge, since the discrimination, in so far it is there, is against Muslim women rather than Hindu men; the sexist male point of view is writ large in the form that these political complaints take. But the general issue of asymmetric treatment is an important one, and there would be nothing non-secular or sectarian in pursuing the possibility of making the provisions of India civil laws apply more even-handedly to individuals of all the communities.

The discussion on secularism has taken us to the need to see India as an integrally pluralist society. There remain importantly unresolved issues in the form that secularism can take in India (related particularly to political tolerance and equal treatment of individual rights), but that does not contradict the overarching recognition that a non-secular Hindu India is basically unviable as well as unjust.

Challenges to Secularism
What, then, are the sources of the challenge that secularism and pluralist tolerance are facing in India now? We can, I think, distinguish between three different – though not unrelated – lines of challenge: (1) communal fascism, (2) sectarian nationalism, and (3) militant obscurantism. I shall discuss them in turn.

I begin with communal fascism. The term fascism is perhaps overused and frequently enough employed too undiscriminatingly as a word of abuse. It is certainly no part of my claim that the entire movement of Hindu politics is fascist in any sense. There are, however, specific political characteristics that are generally associated with fascist movements,[4] and some of these elements

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[4] On this see S J Woolf, ed., *The Nature of Fascism* (London 1968), and Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976).

are certainly present in parts of Hindu extremist politics in India today. The fascist features take the form of use of violence and threat to achieve sectarian objectives, reliance on victimizing members of a particular community, mass mobilization based on frenzied and deeply divisive appeals, and use unconstitutional and strong-armed procedures against particular groups. Some parts of the Hindu extremist movements certainly have these features.

Political activities in Bombay, in particular, have revealed some clearly fascist tendencies. In addition to general riots, the killing of many Muslims in the city was well organised by extremist Hindu groups. Much of the attack was coordinated by a militant organisation powerful in Bombay, called Shiv Sena, named after Shivaji, a 17th century Hindu king of the Marathas from Maharashtra who waged several successful campaigns against the Moghul empire.

It is often pointed out, rightly, that the violence in Bombay had features other than communalism as such. For example, some landlords have evidently taken this opportunity to organize the destruction of unauthorised slums and shelters set up by the homeless, some trading interests may have materially assisted the destructions of shops to eliminate competition, and so on. But fascist operations often have such additional features, in a general atmosphere of the survival of the fiercest.

The victims of the Bombay riots were mostly Muslims, primarily the poor, and frequently those who lead unprotected lives in ramshackle slums,[5] But even some members of the traditionally immune urban affluent groups were murdered on this occasion. In a news interview, Mr Bal Thackeray, the leader of the Shiv Sena, has explained that the mobs that carried out the violence were under his "control", that his party did not mind extorting protection money from civilians for political use, and that if Muslims "behaved like Jews in Nazi Germany", there would be "nothing wrong if they are treated as Jews were in Germany".[6]

Shiv Sena is a localized phenomenon, confined to the state of Maharashtra and largely to the city of Bombay. Even in Bombay, the electoral support of Shiv Sena, though substantial, is limited, and in last year's election for the Bombay Municipal Corporation, they won considerably less than one third of the seats. But they have managed to channel the frustrations of the urban Maharashtrian poor in this negative direction, and have made violence, intimidation and strategically organised mass hysteria magnify their impact.

There were many heroes among the Bombay residents – Hindus as well as Muslims – who risked their lives to save others. But the record of Bombay police in preventing these riots is fairly dismal, and the extent of communal fascist thought among the police has been definitively exposed by the Indian press. The emergence of fascist movements tend, typically, to thrive on appeasement by less determined political groups. In this case, the BJP – not a fascist party itself – has typically condoned the violent activities of the Shiv Sena and has treated it effectively as an ally. Much more importantly, the large and leading Congress party, which runs the government of the Indian union, that of the Maharashtra state, and that of Bombay municipality (including the police), has failed to provide an adequately determined attempt to stamp out Shiv Sena's fascist violence. The dog that did not bark is an important part of the terrible tragedy of Bombay, and more generally across India.

Turning to Shiv Sena itself, Muslims have not been the only victims of its wrath, nor indeed its first target. Shiv Sena has a solid record of union bashing. It has also been a major organ of regional sectarianism. Indeed, it came to prominence through its agitation against non-

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[5] See V K Ramachandran, *Reign of Terror: Shiv Sena Progrom in Bombay*, Frontline, February 12, 1993.
[6] *Time International*, January 25, 1993, p.29.

Maharashtrian people of Bombay, particularly south Indian migrants, whom they wanted to be driven out of the city. Muslims have been adopted as targets only more recently. These shifts, incidentally, also illustrate one of the more general themes of this essay, to wit, that religious secularism cannot be dissociated from the bigger question of pluralist tolerance.

I have taken some time to discuss the situation in Bombay both because a very large proportion of those killed were in Bombay, and also because this form of communal fascism – though fairly singular now in Bombay – can in fact arise elsewhere in India as well.

Sectarian Nationalism
The movement towards a sectarian view of Hindu nationalism is not new in the subcontinent, though the Hindu Mahasabha in British India was far less successful among the Hindus than its counterpart Muslim League was among the Muslims. While the Hindu Mahasabha Muslim League never formally endorsed the Muslim League leader Mr Jinnah's proposition that Hindus and Muslims were "two nations" (this was part of the League's campaign for partition and the creation of Pakistan), In the event, Hindu Mahasabha failed quite miserably in the electoral politics of pre-independence as well as post-independence India, as a result of the incomparably greater success of secular parties which commanded the loyalty of most Hindus.

The BJP is, in an important sense, the successor to that Hindu nationalist movement, and unlike the Hindu Mahasabha (and later the Jan Sangh), BJP is very successful now. It has grown in strength with remarkable rapidity in recent years, moving from securing only two seats in the Indian parliament in the election of 1984, to 85 seats in 1989, and to 119 in 1991 (out of a total of 544 seats). To be sure, even in the last elections, more than three-quarters of the Hindus in India evidently voted against the BJP, in favour of secular parties. But a quarter is a large proportion and the trend of their support has certainly been in the upward direction. The recent events seem to have accelerated this trend, judging from opinion polls, at least in west and the north of India. And central to BJP's approach to Indian politics is some variant or other nationalism interpreted in specifically Hindu terms.

Two Nations and Lesser Tales
How can a religious group within a nation see itself as a separate nation by virtue of that religious identity? In developing the "two nation theory" in undivided India, some of the leaders of the Muslim League had argued that the Indian Muslims came from the countries further west and they were not natives of India. That "two nation theory" is now taken up – explicitly or by implication –by many Hindu spokesmen, in an odd turn in the history of political rhetoric. There is, in fact, scarcely any truth in that theory, since the overwhelming proportion of Muslims in the subcontinent come from families that converted to Islam, rather than migrating from outside the country.

Another argument used by exponents of Hindu nationalism is based on the hypothesis that Indian Muslims are politically foreign in post-partition India, and that they are loyal to Pakistan rather than India. Though spirited anecdotes are easy to devise, there is no serious evidence for this thesis either. On the contrary, a great many Muslims stayed on in post-partition India (rather than going to Pakistan) as a deliberate decision to remain where they felt they belonged. In the Indian armed forces, diplomatic services and administration, Muslims have no different a record on loyalty from Hindus and other Indians.

Muslim Kings and Indian History
Another line of argument that is sometimes used in propagating Hindu nationalism draws on readings of Indian History (though reading is perhaps the wrong word to use here). Much is made of the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb's intolerance of Hinduism, his destruction of temples,

his special taxes on the Hindus, and so on. All this is true of Aurangzeb, but to see him as the representative Muslim monarch of India would be ridiculous history. Indeed, none of the other Moghuls showed anything like the intolerance of Aurangzeb, and some had made great efforts to treat the different religious communities in an even-handed way. Of course, Akbar – the most well remembered of the Moghul emperors – was particularly friendly to Hindu philosophy and culture, had attempted to establish something of a synthetic religion (the Din Ilahi) drawing on the different faiths in India, had filled his court with Hindu as well as Muslim intellectuals, artists and musicians, and in other ways tried to be thoroughly non-sectarian.

Even Aurangzeb's own brother, Dara Shikoh, took much interest in Hindu philosophy and had, with the help of some scholars, prepared a Persian translation of some of the *Upanishads,* which he had compared (in some respects favourably) with the *Koran*. Aurangzeb was Dara Shikoh's rival in his claim to the throne (Dara was the eldest son and the favourite of his father Shah Jahan, the builder of the Taj Mahal), and Aurangzeb could become king only after fighting and defeating Dara, and torturing and beheading him (and imprisoning Shah Jahan for life). Whether or not Aurangzeb's anti-Hindu position owed something to his hatred for his eclectic and somewhat Hinduized brother may be hard to determine, but to pick him as the representative Muslim emperor in India to suggest persistent sectarianism would be a travesty of history. I might add, as an epilogue, that Aurangzeb's own son, also called Akbar, who had rebelled against his father and sought the help of Hindu Rajputs (and later on joined Shivaji's son, Raja Sambhaji), had quite an acrimonious correspondence with his father, defending the excellence of the Rajputs against his father's vilification.

Muslim kings in India came in all shapes and sizes (as did the Hindu and Buddhist monarchs). Some were unfriendly to Hindus, others were not, and some were positively favourable. It is hard to construct a picture of persistent persecution of Hindus by Muslim kings (tempting though that hypothesis is to Hindu nationalism). The idea that retributive justice can be sought now for the past misdeed of Muslim kings, by compromising the civil status of contemporary Indian Muslims, is not only grotesque ethics, it is also preposterous history.

Muslims and Indian Culture

Turning to literature and culture, it is again hard to find any reasoned basis for taking a "two nations" view of Hindus and Muslims. The heritage of contemporary India combines Islamic influences with Hindu and other traditions, and the results of their interaction can be seen plentifully in literature, music, painting, architecture, and many other fields. The point is not simply that so many of the major contributions in these various fields of Indian culture have come from Islamic writers, musicians, painters, and so on, but also that their works are thoroughly integrated with those of Hindu contributors. Indeed, even the nature of Hindu religious beliefs and practices has been substantially influenced by contact with Islamic ideas and values.[7] The impact of Islamic Sufi thought is readily recognizable in parts of contemporary Hindu literature. Further, religious poets like Kabir or Dadu were born Muslim, but transcended the sectional boundaries (one of Kabir's verses declare: "Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir"[8]). They interacted strongly with Hindu devotional poetry and profoundly influenced it.

There is no communal line to be drawn through Indian literature and arts, setting Hindus and Muslims on separate sides. The tradition of integrated work continues straight through to

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[7] On this see Kshiti Mohan Sen,, *Hinduism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960). He discusses the inter-relations in greater detail in his Bengali book *Bharaté Hindu-Mushalmäner jukta sädhanä* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1949).

[8] See *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, translated by Rabindranath Tagore (London: Macmillan, 1915), Verse LXIX. See also Kshiti Mohan Sen, *Hinduism*, Chapters 18 and 19

modern art forms, such as the cinema, where Muslims and Hindus are thoroughly mixed up: even films on Hindu religious themes frequently rely on Muslim actors or actresses.

In fact, Islam itself, practiced in India, cannot but be seen now as an Indian religion, much as the religion of the Parsees or of the Syrian Christians is so accepted. Not only have so many Indians for so many generations been Muslim, Islam also spread to several other countries through the efforts of Indians. While the dissemination of Hindu and Buddhist influences from India to the south-east Asian countries is well acknowledged (and the Hindu activists take pride in the grandeur of Angkor Wat dedicated to Vishnu, and other constructions), it is also the case that it was from India (from Gujerat and elsewhere) that Islam too, first, went to that region, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia.[9]

To sustain the thesis of Hindu nationalism, it is necessary to demote the Indianness of Indian Muslims. But there is no real way of doing this, and absolutely no reasonable basis – racial, political, historical, cultural or literary – for such a view.

Militant Obscurantism
I turn now to the third approach against secularism, viz, militant obscurantism. This cannot be seen as a force on its own, but credulity and archaic beliefs can be effectively exploited to work up a frenzy on obscure religious matters. If the happenings in Bombay indicate the influence of communal fascism, the incidents in and around Ayodhya bring out the force of militant obscurantism, exploited as a political weapon.[10] The mobilized multitude was ready to take their leaders' word for everything: the unestablished historical claim that on the precise location of the mosque, there had been a temple to Rama, which was destroyed by one of the Moghul kings; the extraordinary ethical proposition that if true this would justify the destruction of the mosque now to "rebuild" a temple there; and the grand revelation that Lord Rama, the incarnation of God, was born 5000 years ago at precisely that spot.

Various factors are relevant in explaining this gullibility, but the low level of elementary education and literacy in that part of India cannot but be an important factor. India still has a shockingly low proportion of adult literacy, but in the Hindi belt where the Rama agitation assumed such force, the proportion is dismally low – the lowest in India. The vast majority of the Ayodhya agitators had come from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in that Hindi belt (Ayodhya itself is located in Uttar Pradesh), and all of these states have disproportionately low adult literacy rates (between 39 and 43 per cent according to the 1991 census – indeed India's average figure of 52 per cent partly reflects the large weight of the Hindi belt literacy rates).

An eleventh century account
Obscurantism is, of course, not a new problem in India, and Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru had all written extensively on just this issue. Interestingly enough, one of the earliest descriptions of the phenomenon can be found in the 11th century Arabic account of the mathematician and scientist Alberuni, who wrote what was for many centuries the most authoritative book on Indian intellectual traditions, including mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. I cannot resist a slight digression here, to illustrate how a sensitive observer from abroad saw the contrast between sophisticated intellectual achievements of the-then India and the persistence of obscurantist practice at a popular level.

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[9] See Brian Harrison, *South-east Asia* (London, 1954), p.43
[10] On this subject and on related issues, see the important collection of papers edited by S Gopal, *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 1991)

Alberuni came to India first with the rampaging invader Mahmud of Ghazni, and wrote extremely sympathetically about the destruction caused by Mahmud's raids. With the help of a number of Hindu collaborators and friends, he mastered Sanskrit and studied the contemporary Indian treatises on mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, sculpture, philosophy, and religion. His work was particularly influential in the impact of Indian science and mathematics on the Arab world, and through that on the West.

Alberuni went into the question of idolatry at length (a subject that jars all good Muslims), and he provided a closely argued account as to why philosophical Hindu positions are not idolatrous. He proceeded then to provide extensive accounts of how idols are, in fact, made in popular Hinduism (he discussed in this context the appropriate dimensions of the idol of Rama – like the ones in the Ayodhya dispute today), and then concluded thus:

> Our object in mentioning all this mad raving is to teach the reader the accurate description of an idol, if he happens to see one, and to illustrate what we have said before, that such idols are erected only for uneducated low-class people of little understanding; that the Hindus never made an idol of any supernatural being, much less of God; and, lastly to show how the crowd is kept in thraldom by all kinds of priestly tricks and deceits.[11]

The recent crowds in Ayodhya who have been kept in what can easily be described as "thraldom" have certainly not been deprived of "tricks", coming both from politically active priests and religion-exploiting politicians. Elsewhere, Alberuni speaks of the odd beliefs of people deprived of education, especially "of those castes who are not allowed to occupy themselves with science"[12]

Alberuni's dual points on (1) the extreme gullibility of the uneducated, and (2) the effectiveness of deliberate manipulation by interested parties, have peculiarly contemporary relevance, nearly a thousand years after he presented them. While the failure of successive Indian governments (beginning with Nehru's own) to expand mass education adequately fast across the country has much responsibility in the continued vulnerability of these groups, that fertile ground for militant obscurantism is thoroughly exploited by Hindu political extremists.

What then?
I have so far been analysing and scrutinising the challenges that secularism faces in India today. What can be done about these respective challenges? I consider them in turn, beginning with communal fascism.

The emergence of communal fascism can be handled only through determined confrontation – and by eschewing appeasement. It is terrible to watch responsible political leaders waiting for a shift in public opinion rather than leading it. The lesson of Bombay is mainly a negative one, to wit, catastrophic horrors occur when organized terror in the form of communal violence is not fought back and when responsible authorities drift rather than govern. In the short run, this is mainly a "law and order" matter, but in the longer haul, the need to confront groups such as the Shiv Sena at the ideological level is also important.

This has to include reasserting India's old tradition of tolerance and the acceptance of heterogeneity as part of its identity. In fact, even Shivaji himself, after whom the strong armed Shiv Sena is named, and who certainly was an active Hindu leader (and a most skilful General), was quite respectful of other religions. Some historians (such as Jadunath Sarkar) attribute to

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[11] *Alberuni's India*, Chapter XI, p. 122
[12] *Alberuni's India*, Chapter II, p. 32

him a forceful letter sent to Aurangzeb on religious tolerance. The letter contrasts Aurangzeb's intolerance with the policies of earlier Moghuls (Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan), and then says this:

> If Your Majesty places any faith in those books by distinction called divine, you will there be instructed that God is the God of all mankind, not the God of Muslims alone. The Pagan and the Muslim are equally in His presence ... In fine, the tribute you demand from the Hindus is repugnant to justice.[13]

That letter may or may not have been actually authored by Shivaji, [14] but it would not be out of line with his attitude to the religions of others. In fact, the Moghul historian Khafi Khan, who was very critical of Shivaji in other respects, nevertheless had the following to say about his treatment of Muslims:

> [Shivaji] made it a rule that wherever his followers were plundering, they should do no harm to the mosques, the book of God, or the women of any one. Whenever a copy of the sacred Quran came into his hands, he treated it with respect, and gave it to some of his Mussalman followers.[15]

The tradition of religious toleration in India needs to be discussed more extensively in confronting today's problems. In this context it is more important to note that respect for other religions can be found even among those leaders from whom inspiration for intolerant militarism is sought by their present-day followers.

Obscurantism and basic education
Turning next to militant obscurantism, we must clearly distinguish this issue from the general question of Hindu nationalism. Obscurantist politics is, for example, a much more central aspect of the "Rama janmabhumi" (Rama's birthplace) movement in Ayodhya in north India than it is in the Hindu politics of Bombay and the west of India. I shall take up the more widespread phenomenon of Hindu nationalism later on.

The potential for obscurantism thrives on educational backwardness and gullibility, whereas the conversion of that potential into actual militancy depends on political exploitation by interested parties. A much more determined effort is certainly needed in overcoming educational backwardness that sustains persistent vulnerability, especially in those regions where basic schooling is extremely deficient, where exposure to scientific thought is most limited, and where recruiting volunteers in the name of Rama and Hanuman for such activities as mosque breaking has proved to be dead easy. Contrasts within India point to positive possibilities – particularly the contrast between the hold of politically exploitable primitive obscurantism in the Hindi belt and the much lower frequency of it in the more literate and better educated states (such as Kerala or Tamil Nadu in the south).

Casts, inequality and substantive concerns
However, the expansion of basic education and the related broadening of the horizon of knowledge and awareness will take time, and meanwhile the possibility of political exploitation of that fertile ground for obscurantist and sectarian militancy has to be faced. That possibility will depend much on what the Hindu political organisations choose to do. If the BJP had gone in

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[13] Vincent Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, 4th edition, edited by Percival Spear (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 417-8
[14] It is suggested that Nil Prabhu Munshi was the scribe of this letter (Shivaji could not write). An alternative hypotheses attributes the authorship to Rana Raj Singh of Mewar/Udaipur
[15] Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, p. 412

the direction of becoming a truly national party, even trying to gain support among the Muslims (as it certainly tried to do at one stage) the situation would be quite different now. Evidently, that statesmanly move has been abandoned, and BJP's present concentration is on becoming powerful through sectarian support.

Preventing that political exploitation depends, therefore, on other parties and other social and political groups in the Indian polity. That this type of political exploitation can be prevented is well brought out by the experience of the state of Bihar, which also has a terribly low percentage of literacy and basic education, like the rest of the Hindi belt (in fact only 39 per cent in 1991), but which effectively avoided serious participation in the Ayodhya agitation in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh and managed to avoid communal riots on the aftermath of it. The Bihar state government showed a level of determination and leadership in preventing the chaos and the killing that can be profitably emulated by others.

Underlying the difference is also the fact that the major political leadership in Bihar comes from the backward castes, and the government and the ruling parties have tended to channel the energy of rural agitation in a different direction – in battling the dominance of high-caste Hindus. It is, in fact, significant that there have been very little obscurantist agitation and remarkably few cases of communal violence in those states in which organised anti-high-caste movements have been prominent and successful. Among them the southern states do, of course, have much higher levels of education than what is typical in the Hindi belt. But even in Bihar which is solidly in the Hindi belt and has just as much – or more – illiteracy as the other states in that belt, it appears that serious involvement in more substance-based issues (such as economic and social inequality) has succeeded in restraining the political exploitation of obscurantist potentials.

Hindu nationalism and its reliance on ignorance
I turn last to the major phenomenon of rising Hindu nationalism. In analysing this phenomenon, we have to distinguish between the small hard core of firm believers and the large – somewhat amorphous – group of partial recruits. The hard core certainly is not new (Mahatma Gandhi was shot by one of them forty-five years ago), but what has given Hindu nationalism the boost that it has received in recent years is a massive expansion of partial converts at varying levels of commitment. That commitment, I have argued earlier on in the lecture, has been secured on the basis of a systematically distorted reading of Indian history and culture. The success of the strategy has depended on its not being challenged with appropriate force and initiative, and that is where a change is needed.

A remarkable aspect of the recent Hindu politics is its reliance on illiteracy and ignorance at different levels. Agitations like the Rama janmabhumi movement bank on educational and scientific naivety. The belated adaptation of the "two nations" view of Hindus and Muslims counts on innocence about the origin and composition of the Indian population. The questioning of the Indian Muslim's "Indianness" relies on ignorance of Indian history, politics, art, and culture. And the Hindu nationalist's intolerance of plurality and heterodoxy is based on illiteracy about Hinduism itself.

Another remarkable aspect of the biased focus of the Hindu political activist is the neglect of the more major achievements of Indian civilisation – even the distinctly Hindu contributions – in favour of its more dubious features. Not for them the sophistication of the Upanishads or Gita, or of Brahmagupta or Shankara, or of Kalidasa or Shudraka, but the adoration of Rama's idol and Hanuman's image. The form of their nationalism also effectively shuts out the rationalist traditions of India, a country in which some of the earliest steps in algebra, geometry and astronomy were taken, where the decimal system emerged, where early philosophy – secular as well as religious – achieved exceptional sophistication, where people invented games like chess,

pioneered sex education and initiated systematic political economy. the Hindu militant chooses to project India instead – explicitly or by implication – as a country of unquestioning idolaters, credulous fantasists, quarrelsome devotees, and religious murderers.

This is, of course, James Mill's imperial view of India, elaborated in his famous "history" (Written without visiting India or learning any Indian language) – an India that is intellectually bankrupt but full of outrageous ideas and barbarous social events. Indian nationalists in the past had disputed the authenticity of that image by focusing on other sides of India; the Hindu nationalists of the present are bent on proving James Mill right.[16]

Anti-secular sectarians are having a field day in India right now – a day that has flourished on divisiveness and hatred, on obscurantism and exploitation. But their strength is ultimately limited. The weakness does not lie only in the fact that even now a vast majority of Indians – Hindus as well as Muslims – continue to stand opposed to those ideas (and that despite rather little leadership from the top). The weakness arises also from the vulnerability of exploiting one particular division (that of religion), while other heterogeneities (regional diversities, castes and classes, different educational backgrounds) pull in other directions. But the most profound weakness of extremist Hindu politics lies in the basic frailty of relying on ignorance at different levels – from exploiting illiteracy and credulity (to generate militant obscurantism) to misrepresenting India's past and present (to foster divisiveness and hatred). The weakest link of the sectarian chain is that basic dependence on ignorance. This is where a confrontation is most awaited.

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[16] In my Lionel Trilling Lecture at Columbia University ("India and the West") I discuss the role played by foreign observations of India in influencing the self-perception of Indians themselves.