

# Unsettled Territories: State, Civil Society, and the Politics of Religious Conversion in India

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**Abstract:** The article argues that the secular Indian state and the Hindu nationalist movement are invested in restricting changes in religious membership in ways that intensify religious and caste-based inequalities. The secular state and the Hindu nationalist movement attempt to enforce a shared model of religion that takes the form of a fixed territory. In this model, changes in religious membership through conversion are restricted. An analysis of state-civil society interactions in India must therefore move away from a presumed opposition between state secularism on the one hand and religious nationalism and conflict within civil society on the other. The article draws on three cases: (1) nationalist debates over caste and religious conversion, (2) Hindu nationalist mobilization against religious conversion, and (3) state caste-based affirmative action policies that restrict benefits based on religious conversion.

The relationship between religion and politics has been marked by a complex and highly charged history and has shaped democratic politics in contemporary India in distinctive ways.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, a rising Hindu nationalist movement came to power with electoral victories of its political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Contemporary politics in India was marked by violent Hindu-Muslim conflicts — most visibly by the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a mosque that Hindu nationalist movement activists claimed was the birthplace of Hindu god Ram and that was the symbolic center of the movement's mobilizational successes. By the early 2000s, while the BJP experienced national electoral losses,

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violence against minority Muslim and Christian communities continued in particular regions of the country.<sup>2</sup>

The Hindu nationalist electoral victories in the 1990s and such cases of continued violence have produced wide-ranging analyses of the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary India. Social science scholarship has sought to analyze the causes of the rise of Hindu nationalism, the future of the secular state, and the role of religious beliefs and identities in shaping public life.<sup>3</sup> Scholarship on Hindu nationalism has analyzed the changes in the substantive nature of both state and civil society. Such work has focused on the challenges that Hindu nationalism has posed for the secular framework of the state and the nature of civil society (as the growing strength of religious nationalist organizations and cultural ideals have changed the nature of public culture and political discourses). The dominant approaches in this field have sought to explain these patterns variously in terms of the rise of new Hindu publics created through cultural tactics and media technologies (Hansen 1999; Rajagopal 2001), the presence or absence of cross-community social networks (Varshney 2003), and the political responses and electoral calculations of political parties and the state (Brass 1997; Wilkinson 2006).

One of the central theoretical questions underlying the broad political trends that this work has sought to address is the complex relationship between the state and civil society. Explanations of the rise of Hindu nationalism have centered on three central aspects regarding the changing relationship between state and civil society. First, scholars have pointed to variations in the structure of civil society as a major factor that causes religious conflict. Ashutosh Varshney (2003), for example, has argued that Hindu-Muslim violence has been limited to specific urban centers where cross-community social networks have been relatively weak. Civil society and the potential for building cross-religious social trust, in this framework, serves as an autonomous solution in lieu of the state. On the other hand, Thomas Hansen's (1999; 2001) analysis of the Hindu nationalist movement has portrayed the movement's successful ability to capture and transform civil society along religious nationalist lines as the means the movement used to gain access to state power. Second, scholars have focused on the role of state intervention in changing civil society by either exacerbating religious conflict (Brass 1997) or alternatively limiting religious conflict as electoral calculations have induced political parties to moderate their religious nationalist positions (Wilkinson 2006). Finally, some scholars have turned away from the problem of religious nationalism and focused instead on the limits of

the secular state. For instance, well known Indian scholar and critic Ashish Nandy (2002) has argued that the failure of Indian secularism to address the religious nature of political life in contemporary India has set up an inevitable conflictual relationship between the secular state and a religious civil society.

This vast scholarship on religious nationalism and religious/ethnic conflict has largely focused on the conflicts, hierarchies, and negotiations between Hindu and Muslim communities. Such analyses have demonstrated that religious identity does not operate as a singular or foundational identity in contemporary Indian politics. The politicization of religious identity is shaped by its intersections with social identities such as caste, class, and gender (Jeffrey and Basu 1997; Hansen 1999). New patterns of political participation of caste-based communities and the corresponding rise of caste-based parties have also undermined easy notions of singular Hindu identities (Chandra 2004; Hasan 1998). However, despite these complexities, most analyses have been heavily weighted toward a focus on conflicts between clearly demarcated religious communities with an explicit focus on Hindu-Muslim relations. Less attention has been paid to the political dynamics surrounding the changes in memberships in religious communities and the changes in religious identity that result from religious conversion.<sup>4</sup> At one level this focus reflects the historical specificities of religious conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities in India. However, at a deeper level, such an analytical lens (one that rests on the existence of discrete, fixed boundaries between religious communities) reflects the particular character of the secular state in India. The secular state in India has historically been invested in the demarcation of clearly delineated religious communities. In this version of state secularism, the equality of all religions has been contingent on a presumption of fixed and autonomous territories that these communities occupy. While Indian state secularism has been founded on constitutional principles of religious equality, its role as an overarching arbitrator of India's religions has in practice been oriented toward a model that has paradoxically produced a more restrictive form of religious market (Jelen and Wilcox 2002).<sup>5</sup> Religious conversion disrupts the delicate balance that the secular state has sought between competing religious communities. In this process, the state shifts from a neutral force managing religions to an actor that becomes invested in preserving particular models of religious communities within civil society.

My central argument is that both the secular Indian state and the Hindu nationalist movement are invested in restricting changes in religious

membership in ways that intensify religious and caste-based inequalities in contemporary India. In differing ways, both the secular state and the Hindu nationalist movement attempt to enforce a model of religion that takes the form of a fixed territory where changes in religious membership that would involve a movement between religions is restricted or severely curtailed. Furthermore, I argue that the restriction of changes in religious membership in contemporary India has targeted lower-caste communities, given the historically-specific linkages between religion and caste in India. Given that scholarship on religion and politics in India has focused on conflicts between fixed religious communities, this analysis provides a distinctive perspective on contemporary democratic politics in India. The argument challenges analyses of contemporary Indian politics that focus on an opposition between the secular state, on the one hand and religious conflict within civil society, on the other. The politics of religious conversion unsettles this presumed opposition between state and civil society and provides a lens for a closer examination of the relationship between the state and civil society in India.

I develop this argument by engaging in an interpretive analysis of particular historical and contemporary cases of religious conversion. I begin by elaborating on the theoretical framework that guides my analysis of state and civil society. I then present the historical context that has shaped contemporary politics of religious conversion and the links between caste and religious conversion. I focus in particular on nationalist debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar, the author of India's constitution and the most prominent "untouchable" (outcaste/dalit)<sup>6</sup> leader who converted to Buddhism in order to escape caste inequality. I then analyze the political dynamics surrounding more recent cases of religious conversion. I analyze the way in which the Hindu nationalist movement has politicized religious conversion and sought to redefine state-civil society relations in contemporary India. Finally, I examine the way in which state welfare policies have used religious conversion to delineate which *dalit* communities can gain benefits of state reservations (quotas) in education and employment.

## **THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS: CONVERSION, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE IN INDIA**

Despite the wealth of scholarship on religion and politics in India, there has been little broader analysis on the implications that conversion has

for understandings of civil society, the state, and democratic politics (Washburn and Reinhart 2007). In recent years, the politicization of religious conversion — particularly in relationship to Christian missionary activity — has become an important political strategy of the Hindu nationalist movement. The Hindu nationalist movement's success in politicizing this issue is an example of its successful ability to transform religious minority communities into a threat to a purified Hindu-Indian national identity (Hansen 1999). The movement has sought to cast conversion as an anti-national strategy being used by foreign missionaries. Organizations affiliated with the movement have used violence against individuals and groups that are perceived as converts and clergy have increasingly been the subject of political and in some cases violent attacks. This politicization of religious conversion provides a lens for deepening our understanding of the changing relationship between state and civil society in the context of India's democratic political structures. First, the politics of religious conversion helps us to understand some of the specificities of the secular democratic state in contemporary India. This case of religious politics reveals the continued investment of the state in framing and maintaining fixed religious distinctions between religious communities — an investment that continues some of the historical legacies of the colonial state. Second, the politics of religious conversion also provides a lens for a deeper understanding of the Indian state and its embeddedness within societal structures. In particular, it compels us to confront the tension between the ideals of political rights and the intersecting inequalities of caste and religion that structure social life in contemporary India. This tension between rights and inequality shapes the substantive nature of democratic citizenship in India. Democratic political citizenship in India rests on the state's investment in producing and reinforcing social distinctions. In other words, social inequality and religious distinctions have been built into democratic secular conceptions of citizenship, and are not simply a product of particular political events or periods of social history in India.

The case of religious conversion in India contributes to broader theoretical debates on state/civil society boundaries and the question of political rights and social distinction. Political scientists have sought to capture the messy interaction between state and civil society in a number of ways. In an essay on the nature of modern state power, Timothy Mitchell for instance has argued that the boundary between the state and civil society “must not be taken as a boundary between two discrete entities, but as a line drawn internally within the network of institutional

mechanisms through which a social and political order has been maintained” (Mitchell 1991, 78). Such analyses point us to a broader understanding of the modern state that has been best captured by Joel Migdal’s “state-in-society” model. Migdal has argued that the state is defined in terms of both image and practice — “(1) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory, and (2) the actual practices of its multiple parts” (Migdal 2001, 16). An adequate understanding of state power in India requires that we hold in tension both dimensions about which Migdal has written — both the everyday state practices (Fuller and Bénéï 2001) that blur into civil society and the image and the ideal of the state that claims to stand above and apart from these practices.<sup>7</sup> The politics of religious conversion, as it has unfolded in contemporary India points to the heart of this tension between the image and practices of the modern state. At a surface level, the politicization of religious conversion disrupts the ideal image of a secular state functioning as an autonomous entity that is equidistant from discrete religious communities. Hindu nationalist opposition to religious conversion has pressed the state to intervene in judgments about religious practice. State practices thus become intertwined with the domain of religious practice. At a deeper level, I will argue that the tension between this image of a transcendent secular state on the one hand and the messier reality of state practices on the other, rests on a deeper tension between the political and social realms within democratic nation-states like India. The juxtaposition between the image and practices of modern state power that Migdal captures rests on a contradiction between ideals of political rights and the everyday practices of the state, which depend on the reproduction of social distinctions and hierarchies. Migdal’s approach also enables a broad conception of the state. In line with Migdal’s broad “state in society” approach, the article analyzes examples of a range of state practices (including nationalist discourses that begin to constitute the emerging independent Indian state, local state and central government practices, court rulings, and ideological postures of elected officials). Furthermore, Migdal’s conception of the social dimensions of the state enables an approach that examines state practices within the religious sphere through an analytical lens that does not reduce social inequalities such as religion and caste to ideological or super-structural dimensions of the state. As I will illustrate, the practices of the Indian state are invested not merely in constructing distinct communities but also in managing the relationship between intersecting identities such as caste and religion.

A close analysis of such state practices within the social realm thus deepens our understanding of the functioning of the secular democratic state. The politics of religious conversion in India is a particularly fruitful case for exploring these processes both because conversion unsettles the discrete separation between religions and because religious conversion in India is simultaneously shaped by the intersections between caste and religion. The question of religious conversion in India thus enables us to address the question of state-civil society boundaries through a distinctive lens.

## **HISTORICAL ROOTS: NATIONALISM, CASTE, AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

The politics of religious conversion in India have been shaped by a long and complex history of British colonialism. British missionary activity was a significant force during the colonial period and their practices and discourses overlapped in significant ways with state political discourses that constructed Indians and Hindus as culturally and racially inferior groups that were in need of British civilizing forces. However, religious conversion was not an integral part of British colonial state policy and the state often oscillated between pressures to reform what it viewed as “barbaric” customs in keeping with its civilizing discourse on the one hand, and its interest in avoiding social and political unrest that would potentially arise from state intervention in cultural and religious traditions on the other. As historians of India have illustrated, colonial state policies were thus primarily focused on identifying and constructing official models of Indian religious traditions that the state then used as the basis for creating a legal system based on personal/religious laws for Indians subjects of colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> The result was that British missionary groups had a complex and often conflictual relationship with the colonial state.<sup>9</sup> Given the colonial state’s strategy of using Indian (Hindu and Muslim) religious laws as a basis for colonial rule, religious conversion disrupted colonial state power in fundamental ways. One of the foundations of colonial rule was the delineation of clear religious communities with fixed traditions that would serve as the basis for both its system of personal laws and its political management of a highly diverse Indian subcontinent. Religious conversion disrupted the clear boundaries between religious communities that were at the heart of these colonial strategies of rule. Gauri Viswanathan, for instance, has provided an acute analysis of the



ways in which religious conversion served as a threat to colonial state power. She has forcefully argued that religious conversion produced a form of “civil death” as converted individuals lost rights to inheritance or marriage since conversion meant they lost their caste status within Hinduism. This process led the colonial state to engage in judicial interventions in a range of civil cases (Viswanathan, 1998, 75) in order to try and restore such rights. The overarching judicial response of the colonial state was to treat Christian converts as Hindus for the purposes of the law. Thus, rather than create an autonomous secular sphere of civil laws, the colonial state chose to rely on its use of religious community based personal laws to determine such civil cases. As Viswanathan has argued, “In the name of protecting the civil rights of Christian converts, British legislation characteristically endorsed a homogeneous — essentially Hindu — social identity, rejecting both the assertions of converts about real differences in their past and [about] present religious convictions and a parallel move by communities to enforce those differences on the grounds that loss of caste was irreversible” (Viswanathan 1998, 80). The state thus, in effect, nullified the social and civil effects of religious conversion and solidified its political reliance on the preservation of fixed religious communities. As religious conversion unsettled clear-cut social boundaries between religious communities, the state reasserted these boundaries in order to preserve the social foundations within civil society that were necessary for the exercise of state power.

This complex colonial history provides the context for the relationship among religious conversion, civil society, and the nation-state in contemporary India. The reliance of the colonial state on the preservation of distinct, fixed religious communities with autonomous religious traditions, and personal laws was both retained and reworked within the framework of the emerging independent nation-state in the 20th century.<sup>10</sup> The retention of religious personal laws was for instance maintained within the new Indian state and, as I will argue, both nationalist ideologies and post-colonial state practices in independent India have retained a preoccupation with preserving fixed religious boundaries. However, a distinctive dimension of nationalist and post-colonial state practices is a marked preoccupation with the intersection between caste and religion in debates on religious conversion. This is not to say that colonial authorities did not shape caste formations in important ways (Dirks 2001). However, the place of caste in nationalist debates and post-colonial state practices regarding conversion has evolved in distinctive ways that are not merely reducible to colonial state practices. The distinctive place of caste in debates on conversion is



first marked by conflicts within the Indian nationalist movement. The most visible nationalist debate on religious conversion took place between two of India's most prominent nationalist leaders, Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar and was centrally focused on questions of caste inequality.

Ambedkar and Gandhi engaged in a long debate over questions of caste inequality and the over the relationship between caste, religion and India's nationalist movement. Their conflicts over caste and the question of religious conversion provide us with a deeper understanding of the defining frames of Indian nationalism and the emerging post-colonial state. Gandhi is well known for having launched an active program of social reform designed to combat caste-based discrimination against "untouchables" (Dalton 1998; Rudolph and Rudolph 2006). However, Gandhi also continued to maintain that religiously-based occupational stratification was an essential organizing unit of Hindu society that could be cleansed of its negative discriminatory connotations. He strongly supported the Vedic concept of "Varna" that identifies a religious basis for occupational and social locations and specifies that members of particular Varnas are religiously bound to serve in particular occupations. Gandhi insisted that the concept of Varna was a positive means of social organization for Hindu society because it provided a foundation for creating unity and social harmony. Gandhi argued that since all occupations should be treated with dignity, Varna (unlike caste) was not a cause of discrimination. As Gandhi put it,

Hinduism does not believe in caste. I would obliterate it at once. But I believe in varnadharma, which is the law of life. I believe that some people are born to teach and some to defend and some to engage in trade and agriculture and some to do manual labour, so much so that these occupations become hereditary. The law of varna is nothing but the law of conservation of energy. Why should my son not be a scavenger if I am one? (Gandhi 1937)

Ambedkar strongly opposed this distinction between caste and varna and launched sharp criticisms of Gandhi's refusal to reject caste as an organizing principle of both Hindu and Indian society (Jaffreot 2005; Omvedt 1994). While Gandhi is well known for his social "upliftment" work for "untouchables" (a group he renamed "harijans"), he insisted that the concept of Varna (caste) was a foundational organizing principle of society that was necessary for unity. Thus, in his writings, Gandhi explicitly supported caste-based ideologies, which dictated that particular social

groups were better suited for particular occupations (thus preserving the caste-based social hierarchies linked to occupation). Gandhi insisted that such occupational distinctions could be maintained while treating all occupations with dignity.

Ambedkar himself, as is well known to Indian specialists, was the first dalit to receive a Ph.D. (from Columbia University) and a law degree. After returning from his education in London and New York he was unable to practice law in India because of his caste status. It was precisely such discrimination in employment that Ambedkar argued was being recast by Gandhi as an acceptable form of hierarchy and exclusion. Ambedkar believed that Gandhi was committed to retaining rigid and exclusionary caste distinctions. He argued forcefully against Gandhi's religious beliefs in the hereditary nature of occupational status and indicated that Gandhian beliefs in the Varna system were fundamentally opposed to democracy (Ambedkar 2002).

In his struggle to combat caste discrimination, Ambedkar engaged in extensive religious, economic, and social analyses of India. He ultimately reached a conclusion that Hinduism was too firmly founded on caste and he turned instead to a strategy of religious conversion to combat caste inequality. He engaged in a long, reasoned process in which he carefully explored and researched different religious traditions. He announced his decision to convert to Buddhism in 1935 and finally converted in 1956. During this period, Gandhi expressed adamant opposition to Ambedkar's conversion. Gandhi's opposition to Ambedkar, an example of his opposition to conversion in general, rested on an underlying territorial conception of religion. Gandhi's longstanding work on interfaith harmony rested on a tolerance and embrace of all religious traditions that were founded on a conception of religions as distinct and clearly bounded spaces. The territorial boundaries between religions were to be preserved in much the same way as the territorial boundaries of nation-states. Thus, Gandhi wrote, "It is the transference of allegiance from one fold to another and the mutual denying of rival faiths which gives rise to mutual hatred" (Gandhi 1927, 1). His overall conception of religions as spheres with distinct borders led him to view conversion as a form of betrayal. This understanding of religion meant that religious toleration was cast as a view of religions as equal but separate, bounded entities. Religions, in Gandhi's conception in effect would operate as sovereign provinces co-existing within a unified nation. This conception in many ways echoed the colonial state's investment in the preservation of distinct and fixed religious communities and it also became the

model of state secularism that would become encoded in the constitution of India's newly independent nation-state. Despite these colonial continuities, what was distinctive about the nationalist debates was an intensified concern with the question of caste.

The emerging nationalist concern with caste and religious conversion was shaped by two central concerns. First, Gandhi's concerns with caste reflected his political agenda in maintaining a unified Hindu identity that could serve as a foundation for an independent Indian nation. Gerald Larson for instance has called this an emerging neo-Hindu identity that rested on a combination of both old and newly invented "indic traditions" (Larson 1996, 192). The possibility of an autonomous caste-based movement was threatening to Gandhi both in terms of the challenge it posed to this religious-nationalist identity and in terms of splintering the Hindu community so that it no longer represented the majority community within the emerging Indian nation. Thus, for example, while Gandhi supported separate electoral representation for Muslims (provided by the colonial state), he vociferously opposed similar electoral protections based on caste. Second, Gandhi's resistance to conversion rested on his own caste-based conception of lower-caste communities as passive victims of conversion devoid of autonomous agency. Consider his writings on conversion. On occasion, Gandhi would consent to the possibility that conversions could be genuine, in the process producing a classification of true and false conversions. At one level, Gandhi was responding to colonial missionary forces that were often invested in constructing Hindu society as barbaric and inferior to Christianity. However, his opposition to religious conversion was also inextricably linked to a belief that lower-caste Indians did not have the capacity to make autonomous religious decisions and were in effect being duped by missionaries into converting. Gandhi noted for instance,

I strongly resent these overtures to utterly ignorant men. I can perhaps understand overtures made to me, as indeed they are being made. For they can reason with me and I can reason with them. But I certainly resent the overtures made to Harijans. When a Christian preacher goes and says to a Harijan that Jesus was the only begotten son of God, he will give him a blank stare. Then he holds out all kinds of inducements which debase Christianity. (Gandhi 1937, 4)

Furthermore, Gandhi characterizes Harijans in particular as not having the mental and spiritual capacity to freely convert. In the process, he

effectively constructs Harijan (dalit/untouchable) and low caste conversions in particular as false conversions. When pressed on this question of whether Harijans are capable of reason, Gandhi's response was a qualified assessment.

Dr. C. Would you say a Harijan is not capable of reason?

Gandhi. He is. For instance, if you try to take work out of him without payment, he will not give it. He also has a sense of ethical values. But when you ask him to understand theological beliefs and categories he will not understand anything. I could not do so even when I was 17 and had a fair share of education and training. The orthodox Hindus have so horribly neglected the Harijan that it is astonishing how he adheres to the Hindu faith. Now I say it is outrageous for others to shake his faith. (Gandhi 1937)

As we will see, this construction of religious conversions as "false" because they are presumably based on "inducements" would later form the political and discourse foundation for opposition to religious conversion in contemporary India.

Ambedkar's arguments in favor of conversion and his own personal conversion to Buddhism in many ways occupied a contradictory space in relation to Gandhi's views. At one level, Ambedkar explicitly challenged this territorialized conception of religion implicit in Gandhi's beliefs, arguing that "Today, religion has become a piece of ancestral property. It passes from father to son, so does inheritance" (Ambedkar 2002, 221). More significantly, in response to Gandhi's conception of the peaceful co-existence of sovereign religions, Ambedkar argued that "Untouchables" were in effect rendered into a stateless group. Ambedkar's often cited retort to Gandhi after their first meeting in 1931, "Mahatmaji, I have no country" was a statement about the exclusion of the untouchables from the territorial ambitions of both nation and religion (Viswanathan 1998, 219). Thus, Ambedkar pointed to the emerging fusion between nation and religion, arguing that the Untouchables "have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious cycle" (Ambedkar 2002, 331).

Scholars writing about Ambedkar often view his turn to conversion to escape caste inequality as ironic given his role in writing India's constitution and creating a formal political framework for equal rights. Yet

this paradox turns on Ambedkar's own understanding of the tension between the state's realm of political rights and realities of social practice. In contrast to the state's ideals of democratic citizenship that Ambedkar himself helped frame, his focus on religious conversion rested on a belief that political rights were contingent on access to membership within a particular model of social life — one that was grounded in religious community. Exit from caste Hinduism was necessary but not sufficient. One of Ambedkar's central arguments for dalit conversion was that it provided social membership in a new community. This complex relationship between political rights and religious membership is evident in Ambedkar's argument that with conversion:

Politically the Untouchables will lose political rights that are given to the Untouchables. This is, however, no real loss. Because they will be entitled to the benefit of the political rights for the community which they would join through conversion. Politically there is neither gain nor loss. Socially, the untouchables will gain absolutely and immensely because by conversion the Untouchables will be members of a community whose religion has universalized and equalized all values of life (Ambedkar 2002, 230).

Ambedkar's response reveals a conception of rights in which community membership becomes necessary for the full realization of political rights. This is not, as Viswanathan has suggested, because Ambedkar "despaired of the state being a source of fundamental rights" (Ambedkar 2002, 236) but because he conceptualized state power as a force that was exercised through and in relationship to distinct religious communities. In that sense, Ambedkar's turn to religious conversion embodied an acceptance of Gandhian conceptions of religion as a social territory in which membership was linked to membership in the national territory of the state. This turn to the social/religious spheres as a complement to political rights points to Ambedkar's attempt to reconcile the two dimensions of the state — the idealized image of secular democracy and the messier set of practices that blur the lines between state and civil society. The image of an autonomous state would lead him to focus on the need for clear constitutional protections of fundamental rights. However, his experience and struggles against caste gave him an understanding of the state that was closer to a "state-in-society" model in which the state is entrenched within societal practices and social structures.<sup>11</sup>

The Ambedkar-Gandhi contestations over caste, religion, and the nation-state provide us with the historical context of the political frames that shape negotiations of state-civil society boundaries in post-colonial India. These underlying historical continuities reveal that a shared territorialized conception of religious community is embedded in the colonial state, in Gandhi's politics and (in more nuanced form) in Ambedkar's political thought. For instance, Ambedkar ultimately rejected Islam and Christianity in his search for a new religion because he believed that Islam and Christianity were not indigenous Indian religions. This framing is a precursor to current Hindu nationalist territorial definitions of "Indian" religions as religions that emerged within India's territorial boundaries. The contemporary Hindu nationalist definition includes Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism as Hindu-Indian religions but excludes Christianity and Islam as non-Indian or foreign religions. This idea of territorialization is important because it points to the ways in which the boundary between state and civil society is negotiated through this particular model of religious community. Much has been written about the crisis or failure of state secularism in contemporary India (Needham and Rajan 2007). This discussion of territorialized religion provides a different avenue to the question of state secularism. Rather than rehearsing the question of whether there is an unbridgeable divide between state secularism and a religiously oriented society — a question that reproduces a clear juxtaposition between the state and society, an analysis of religious conversion points to the ways in which state secularism relies on and produces this territorialized model of religion. This is in line with Akeel Bilgrami's argument that the crisis of secularism has had less to do with an inherent failure of the concept of secularism than with the lack of a form of negotiated secularism in India (Bilgrami 1994, 1755). Bilgrami has argued that it is this failure to produce a form of negotiated secularism out of a contested but dynamic engagement between secular thought and various forms of religious thought that has continued to provoke tensions between the secular democratic state and various forms of religious politics.

The nationalist narrative that emerges in the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar and the subsequent constitutional framing of secularism in independent India illustrate the aborted nature of this process of negotiation. The nationalist territorial framing of religion in effect represented the precursor of the state's dependence on the preservation of fixed religious boundaries within civil society. The constitutional coding of religious freedom in the newly independent nation-state was thus primarily

oriented toward community rights rather than individual rights (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001). In the process, the exercise of state power maintained its investments in maintaining and shaping the boundaries of religious communities. In the case of minority religious communities, this meant preserving the rights of minority religious communities to regulate personal laws such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In the case of Hinduism, the nation's religious majority, this meant that the state played a central role in both shaping reforms in Hindu law and ultimately defining the modern definitions of Hindu identity. While the constitution guaranteed religious freedom, it also allowed the state both to regulate economic, political and secular activity associated with religious practice, and to engage in social reform of Hindu religious institutions (Constitution Article 26). As Ronojoy Sen has argued in an insightful analysis, the Supreme Court of India for instance has played a central role in shaping definitions of Hinduism (Sen 2006).<sup>12</sup> It is this specific kind of delineation of state/civil society boundaries that resurfaces in distinctive ways in post-colonial India as the state continues to revert to this dependence on shaping territorialized religious communities.

## **HINDU NATIONALISM, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE STATE**

The politics of religious conversion has once again surfaced as a potent national political issue in contemporary India during the recent decades. The most visible signal that the Hindu nationalist movement intended to use the question of conversion as an issue for political mobilization was former Prime Minister Vajpayee's call for a national debate on conversion in 1999. In this quest, the Hindu nationalist movement has used a variety of strategies that have effectively played on the shifting lines between state and civil society. At the broadest level, the movement has effectively framed the national political debate so that religious conversion has come to be almost solely identified with the presence of foreign missionary activity and coercive missionary tactics. This strategy has followed the conventional terms of Hindu nationalist ideology by focusing on conversions to Christianity and Islam, the two religions that the movement has traditionally constructed as anti-national. The strategy reflects the specific conception of territorialized religion that has been the foundation of Hindu nationalist ideology. According to Hindutva ideology, religions must fit a strict territorial definition in order to count as an Indian religion. In this territorial conception, religions that originated within the territorial



borders of the Indian nation-state are defined as legitimate Indian religions. This definition includes religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism and specifically excludes Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, Hindutva ideologues have argued that Hinduism is in fact an overarching religion that subsumes other Indian religions, so that Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism are not independent religions but are off-shoots of Hinduism. Given the colonial history of British religious missionary activity, it has been relatively easy for the Hindu nationalist movement to use these territorial definitions of religion to construct Indian Christian churches and communities as anti-national.<sup>12</sup> The movement has thus effectively used anti-colonial and anti-western rhetoric in ways that construct Christian religious activity as evidence of foreign intervention rather than as the religious work of indigenous Indian churches. This has been facilitated by the ability of the Hindu nationalist organizations to find discursive evidence of foreign intervention in global religious discourses of churches (for example, from the Vatican) that often do represent religious conversion as a central strategy for expanding their influence. The result is that the movement has been able to represent Indian churches and their communities that have had a long historical presence in India (in some cases predating the colonial period) as new and threatening anti-national external forces.

One of the central effects of this ideological strategy has been a shift in the underlying terms of democratic citizenship. The ideological construction of Christianity for instance as a foreign and thus potentially anti-national religion provides the means for the effective revocation of civil rights for members of this community. This revocation of citizenship does not occur through the formal or legal realm of the state but through the ways in which citizenship is substantively shaped by everyday social and political practices within civil society. These everyday acts are, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn has argued, the “localized, often face-to-face practices that determine whether people have or do not have substantive as opposed to purely formal rights of citizenship” (Glenn 2002, 2). In the Indian context, the politics of conversion has provided an everyday mechanism that has opened up a set of practices that have begun to substantively limit the terms of citizenship.

Consider a recent example of religious violence that broke out in the state of Karnataka. On September 14, 2008, Bajrang Dal (a Hindu nationalist organization) activists vandalized seven churches and a house protesting alleged conversions of Hindus to Christianity. The activists vandalized the churches and also attacked the house of a new convert. Similar patterns

of violence had occurred in previous weeks in Orissa and the Karnataka violence shortly spread to Kerala. In immediate response to the attacks in Karnataka, the Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa's first response was to urge Christian missionaries not to engage in forced conversions noting that "There is no room for forcible conversion in democracy" (*Bandh in Mangalore after Hindu Activist's Stabbing* 2008). The response of the Chief Minister in effect deployed the rhetoric on forced *versus* consensual conversions to displace the substantive questions of violence and citizenship rights of the minority groups under attacks. The construction of conversion as coercion in effect becomes not just a justification for the Bajrang Dal violence but an implicit attempt to delineate new conditions for the rights of citizenship. The right to state guarantees of law and order and religious freedom for both individuals and communities become contingent on the question of religious conversion. Or put another way, accusations of conversion practices become a political and social mechanism used to substantively foreclose democratic citizenship for particular individuals and communities. It is instructive, for instance, that, in this example, violence was not simply targeted against several churches but also against the private house of an individual convert — a dimension to the violence that reflects a foreclosure not just of community but of individual rights.

The production and foreclosure of the terms of citizenship through such practices once again raises the question of the boundary negotiations between state and civil society. The impact of this successful deployment of conversion to change the terms of citizenship and civil rights is evident at broader level through the series of anti-conversion bills that have been passed by several state governments. In 2002, Tamil Nadu became the first state to ban religious conversion by "force, allurement or fraudulent means." Several states have passed similar legislation including Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat, Chattisgarh, and Himachal Pradesh. States such as Madhya Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh have legislation that bans conversions without government permits from the district magistrate. However, reconversion to Hinduism (often engaged in as mass public rituals by Hindutva activists) is not covered by the ban. A defining element of such legislation is the inclusion of languages of "allurement" and "inducement" — a terrain that occupies a murky area between consent and coercion since allurement can range from the possibility of religious-based promises of social equality free of caste discrimination to the ability of converts to gain access to free education and health care provided by Christian hospitals and schools. More significantly, it

becomes the role of the state to determine whether conversions are authentic conversions; state officials thus become responsible for determining the boundaries of spiritual purity.

The examples I have been providing give us a window to the ways in which Hindu nationalist organizations and political parties have effectively used the politics of conversion to play on the fluid boundaries between state and civil society in order to redefine the terms of secularism and democratic citizenship. On the one hand, the politicization of conversion begins to restrict citizenship rights. Conversion begins to produce a form of civic death in which citizens that have changed their religion stand to lose citizenship rights. On the other hand, local state officials become the arbiter of true and false faith, once again serving the function of policing the boundaries of religious territories. Such processes, of course, have not gone uncontested. Religious minorities and secular civic organizations have actively sought to contest these developments both by playing on fractures within the state (for e.g., by filing legal briefs with higher court and the Supreme Court) and by engaging in social protest. Thus, the initial bill in Tamil Nadu was followed by an attempted mass conversion of dalits to Buddhism and Christianity. However, the ceremony was blocked by state intervention as the police both arrested organizers of the event and blockaded the event, preventing cars and individuals from reaching the event — an example that once again illustrated the process of civic death as the state curtailed public access through the policing of movement and social activity.

These examples of the politicization of religious conversion point to the specificity of the role of the Hindutva movement in mobilizing anti-conversion sentiment and in some cases violent opposition. Unsurprisingly, the recent politicization of conversion and the violence against Christian converts has involved Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or Bajrang Dal activists (organizations formally affiliated with the Hindu nationalist movement) and BJP-led state governments (with the exception of the state of Himachal Pradesh where a Congress government was responsible for anti-conversion legislation). At one level, these strategies of mobilization reflect some of the general methods that the Hindu nationalist movement has used to generate support for its agenda. Such strategies are two-fold. First, the movement has consistently used a language of victimization to depict the position of the Hindu majority. The rise of the BJP in the 1990s rested on an effective political and discursive strategy that depicted Hindus as victims of a secular Congress-led state that was dedicated to appeasing minority (particularly Muslim) religious communities. The

mobilization around conversion represents a distinctive reworking of this strategy. The construction of anti-conversion politics as a pursuit of religious freedom attempts to emulate the BJP's 1990s successes with languages of victimization. Thus, as I have illustrated, political rhetoric around conversion have sought to construct converts as Hindus who have been victimized by coercive practices of religious institutions. The institution of "religious freedom" bills also represent a culmination of Hindu nationalist strategies in the 1990s that portrayed the Congress as a "pseudo-secular" force and depicted the BJP as the real secular party.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the enactment of religious freedom bills represents an attempt to manifest such 1990s rhetoric within local state structures. Second, the popular mobilization of violence against Christian communities represents a long-standing strategy that the Hindu nationalist movement has used, particularly when the BJP has not been in power in the central government. Violence has itself constituted a set of local and state practices that the BJP and its allied organizations have traditionally used to generate political support.<sup>14</sup>

While anti-conversion politics has reflected these traditional political strategies, the case of anti-conversion also provides us with a distinctive understanding of the ways in which the intersections between caste and religion have shaped the Hindu nationalist movement. Anti-conversion rhetoric in the Hindu nationalist movement embodies internal contradictions and anxieties over caste inequality within the movement. The rise of the Hindu nationalist movement rested in large part on an upper-caste middle-class base of support (Hansen 1999). The BJP, for instance, mobilized support for its party in the 1990s in part through opposition to affirmative action quotas for lower-caste individuals in public educational institutions.<sup>15</sup> However, the movement has also sought to deploy an overarching Hindu identity that necessarily includes lower-caste participation and identification. As Thomas Hansen has noted, the movement and its strategies of inclusion have been shaped by upper-caste conceptions of low-caste communities (Hansen 1999).<sup>16</sup> The internal caste tensions within the Hindu nationalist movement are evident in the movement's anti-conversion politics. At one level, the discourses of mistrust that surround conversion are intensified in relation to low-caste communities. The emphasis of the movement, as I have noted, has been on the ways in which religious missionaries either dupe converts or use material inducements to buy the conversion poorer low-caste communities. Such rhetoric rests on the assumption that lower-caste communities lack agency or a capacity for autonomous judgment in their decision to convert. At a second level,

Hindu nationalist organizations have used the threat of conversion to mobilize lower-caste communities and link them with the movements' overarching Hindutva identity. Thus, the movement's anti-conversion politics are able to simultaneously reproduce upper-caste conceptions of lower-caste communities as passive and ignorant and bridge caste divisions within the movement.

While anti-conversion mobilizational strategies are now an integral part of the Hindu nationalist movement, they in fact reflect continuities with both older nationalist discourses and post-independent practices of the Indian state. The conception of low-caste communities as devoid of agency and the capacity to make autonomous spiritual decisions without state supervision echo Gandhi's views of Harijans as victims of missionary inducement and devoid of independent spiritual judgment. The historical context of the nationalist movement and the specificities of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debates have produced a lasting intersection between caste and the politics of religious conversion. The broader implications of the politics of conversion are thus not reducible to the role of the Hindu nationalist movement. As early as 1968, for instance, the state of Orissa had passed a "Freedom of Religions Act" that prohibited conversion by force or inducement. As Pal Ruma (2001) has noted, the punishment for violation of this act was 1 year imprisonment and an Rs 5000 fine. However, for the conversion of dalit or tribal individuals, minors, and women, the punishment was 2 years imprisonment and Rs 10,000 fine (Ruma 2001, 26). Thus, we already see the early institutionalization of conceptions of particular groups (such as dalits, women, and tribals) as being particularly "vulnerable" and lacking in independent autonomy in the face of religious conversion. The broader implications of conversion thus become visible when we move away from more overt forms of violence and religious nationalist activity to the ways in which secular versions of state practices have participated in defining the borders in religious communities in ways that produce forms of civic death for religious converts. As with both the nationalist debates and the Hindu nationalist movement, this civic death stems from the question of caste inequality.

## **CASTE, RELIGIOUS CONVERSION, AND SECULAR SOCIAL WELFARE POLICIES**

Both the historical Ambedkar-Gandhi debates and contemporary conversion practices are centered on the problem of caste inequality. Caste

provides a foundational framing issue both in terms of individuals and groups seeking to convert (as we have seen already in the historical roots of this issue) and in terms of the opposition to religious conversion. Caste is central to such processes not only because of its presumed religious basis within Hinduism, but also because the politicization of caste inequality has consistently threatened to disrupt the model of territorialized religion that emerged as a basic unit of nationalist discourses and state practices. In the recent example of violence in Orissa in 2010, for instance, some evidence has indicated that resentment against the perceived material well-being of dalit Christians played a role in fueling the violence. Meanwhile, recent examples of mass conversion of dalits to Buddhism reflect religious practices that are interwoven with individual and collective mobilization for social change. Such conversion practices echo comparative patterns in which religious conversion enables marginalized groups to break from both hierarchical religious structures and give meaning to experiences of social and economic exclusion (Smilde 2007).

The tension between religious conversion and state welfare practices designed to ameliorate caste inequality provides a lens for an understanding of how territorialized models of religion have been encoded within secular state practices. State policy responses designed to ameliorate caste-based discrimination have encoded the kinds of territorially based conceptions of religion that are conventionally associated with Hindu nationalist ideology. State reservations for dalit communities have historically excluded dalit Christians and Muslims from access to such benefits. The state's justification for this has been based on the notion that caste-based inequality has religious roots within Hinduism. Given that religious conversions of dalits to Christianity and Islam have often been linked to a break from the religious basis of caste, the state has held to a position of excluding dalit Christians and Muslims from such welfare policies. However, this ideological justification surrounding the social dimension of conversion breaks down in light of the fact that Buddhist and Sikh dalits have been included in state reservation policies. The state's dividing line has thus not rested on a neutral or secularized approach to social inequality. Rather, the secular state's distinction between dalit Christians and Muslims, on the one hand, and dalit Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu communities, on the other, in fact converges with the Hindutva ideological territorial definitions of Indian versus foreign religions.

The question of reservation rights for Muslim and Christian dalits has intensified in recent years. In recent years, the power of caste-based demands on the state has heightened just as resistance from upper-caste

communities and from critics of reservations has also strengthened. Growing political pressure from dalit Christian and Muslim communities has begun to challenge both the caste-based hierarchies within these communities and the ability of the state to manage the complex intersections between caste, religion, and class.

The Justice Mishra Commission appointed by the government of India to investigate the position of religious minorities has made a recommendation for reservations for Christians and Muslims and a case is now pending before the Supreme Court on these claims. The recommendations have sparked expected resistance from Hindu nationalists but have also raised the possibility of conflicts of interests between dalit Hindu and Christian communities should new reservations be taken from the existing quotas. This example moves us away from more simplified juxtapositions between Hindu nationalism and state secularism. What we see instead is a state engaged in a set of practices struggling to maintain the religious territories that have been the underlying foundation of its model of secularism in the face of a messy set of social inequalities and interests that continue to disrupt clear-cut boundaries between religious communities.

This political struggle once again illustrates the ways in which the politics of caste inequality has been a central factor that has shaped the state attempts to manage religious formations. Court rulings on caste-based welfare claims are another example of the state's attempt to manage the messiness of caste and religious identity. Take for example, a 1996 Supreme Court case of a 14 year old Christian who converted to Hinduism and subsequently sought caste-based reservations benefits based on the fact that his Hindu identity socially located him in his parents' original dalit caste status (Supreme Court of India 1996, cited in Jenkins 2003). The court's judgment went against the boy's claim, essentially ruling that his status was determined at birth (when his parents were Christians) and not by his converted religious status. This decision in part echoes historical patterns (as we have seen stemming back to the colonial period) that have in effect legally nullified the effects of conversion through court rulings. However, at another level the judgment reflects distinctive anxieties of the secular Indian state over political demands for caste-based welfare benefits. This definition of religious and caste identity based on birth reflects an intensification of the state's investment in a rigid classification system. As Laura Dudley Jenkins has demonstrated, this rigidity is not limited to individual court cases but is institutionalized through elaborate state procedures that are designed to monitor the religious status of dalits who either petition to



receive caste-based welfare benefits or have already been certified by the state to receive benefits. For instance, individuals who have received caste certificates must report any change in religious status to their employers (Jenkins 2003, 79).

These examples of court rulings and state identity classification procedures illustrate the ways in which the classificatory practices that I have been analyzing are embedded within the structures of the secular state in India and are not simply reducible to the politics of religious nationalism. The framing of religious conversion through anxieties over religious territories and the fluidity of caste anxiety that were at the heart of nationalist debates, continue to shape the structures and practices of the contemporary state in India. As these examples illustrate, fixed religious territories remain central for the exercise of state power – in this case as it attempts to manage caste politics and demands for social welfare.

## CONCLUSION

My analysis of religious conversion has shown that both the Hindu nationalist movement and the secular Indian state have committed themselves to the preservation of a strict conception of religion as a territory with a restricted membership. Hindu nationalists have mobilized against the threat religious conversion as such changes in religious membership strike at the heart of Hindu nationalist conceptions of the Indian nation as a Hindu nation. However, as I have shown, the attempt to restrict religious membership is not limited to the extremist politics of Hindu nationalism. The secular state has relied on this restricted territorialized model of religion to manage the tensions and competitions between religious communities in India. This form of state secularism has been shaped by specific historical processes that have placed caste inequality at the heart of this form of state management. Both the dominant Gandhian wing of the Indian nationalist movement that emerged in the colonial period and the post-independent Indian state have viewed the religious conversion of lower-caste communities as a primary threat to the precarious relationship between religious communities in India. An adequate understanding of contemporary religious politics in India thus requires a move away from a focus on a presumed opposition between the secular state and religious nationalist or a focus on conflicts between fixed religious communities. The politics of religious conversion reveals that both nationalists (Gandhian and Hindu nationalist) and the secular state have encoded a

caste-based model of religious identity that has limited religious freedom by attempting to restrict changes in religious membership.

The case of religious conversion in India also points to the ways in which comparative studies of religious conversion (Freston 2001; Lewis 2004; Smilde 2007) can inform broader theoretical debates on the nature of democratic politics. At one level, the Indian case provides an example of secular-religious politics that move us away from conventional understanding of religious politics through an analytical opposition between secularism and religion (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Scholars in comparative contacts have noted that the place of religion in secular states varies greatly (Asad 2003; Cinar 2005; Jelen and Wilcox 2002). State practices in effect become one element in the “authorizing process that creates religion” (Asad 1993, 37). Such an analysis complicates current conceptions that tend to associate this process with religious states. The Indian case illustrates the ways in which democratic secular non-western states engage in more subtle interventions in the religious sphere and depend on particular models of religious life for the exercise of state power.

The politics of religious conversion in India thus provides a distinctive lens for an understanding of state-civil society boundaries that underlie the workings of contemporary democratic politics. Historical and contemporary patterns of political discourses and activities reveal a particular model of a territorialized religion that has served as the foundation for the exercise of state power and civil society. This model of territorialized religion, as we have seen, underlies practices of both the secular state and more recent strategies of the Hindu nationalist movement that has risen in recent decades.

This convergence between secular and religious nationalist conceptions of religion points to the ways in which the democratic state in India relies on the preservation of fixed, distinct religious borders. The politics of religious conversion unsettles these boundaries in ways that challenge the substantive meaning of democratic citizenship, whether in terms of definitions and limits on citizenship rights.

## NOTES

1. The most publicized cases of violence have included what analysts and scholars have recognized as state sponsored violence against Muslims led by a BJP-led state government of Gujarat in 2002. While the BJP faced national electoral losses the chief minister of Gujarat was re-elected. More recently violence has specifically been targeted against Christian communities in states such as Orissa and Karnataka.

2. The political salience of this focus has been heightened by a 2006 Government of India's report (the Sachar report) documenting various inequalities and forms of discrimination that shape the socio-economic location of Muslims in India.

3. Scholarship on religious conversion in India has been primarily historical work addressing colonial missionary activity and by anthropologists and sociologists who have focused more on thick descriptions of conversion activities and religious identity (e.g., Frykenberg 2008; Robinson and Clarke 2003; Viswanathan 1998).

4. The particular nature of Indian state secularism has been the source of significant debate and some have argued has exacerbated religious tension. Constitutional protections of minority religious communities have demarcated personal laws (governing areas such as marriage and inheritance) as separate arenas to be governed by the religious laws of minority communities. Hindu personal laws, however, have been subject to some reform. In the 1990s, the Hindu nationalist movement was successfully able to use a demand for a uniform civil code as a means for attacking constitutional protections for minority religious communities. The reliance on personal laws is historically shaped by legal traditions developed by the British colonial state in India. Restrictions or opposition to conversion are not unique to the Indian case. For instance, conversion from Islam is illegal in many Islamic states. The Indian case is distinctive because opposition to conversion is occurring in the context of a stable secular democratic political system.

5. Note there are a range of terms used for this community. The older disparaging term "untouchable" has been replaced by the term dalit. The state used the term "Scheduled caste" and Gandhi used the term "Harijan." I generally use the term dalit in the article except when using historically specific language of social and political actors.

6. Note that Gramsci's (1971) theoretical writings have also interrogated the boundaries between state and civil society. The approaches developed by Mitchell and Migdal have been foundational in political science research on state/civil society boundaries. Their theoretical approaches also provide a basis for understanding state/civil society links through social practices in ways that are fruitful for a deeper understanding of how religious politics cut across state-civil society boundaries. See for e.g., Freedman (2009) for an analysis on Islam and politics in Indonesia and Malaysia.

7. The state was often most conflicted over particular forms of gender issues such as sati (the practice of widow immolation) and child marriage. However even in cases such as sati, colonial officials were more concerned with identifying practices that were sanctioned by Hindu scripture. See for e.g., Mani (1998) for a detailed analysis of the complexities of this process.

8. Much of the Indian subcontinent was under British colonial rule. Parts of India that were under Portuguese colonial rule (primarily the state of Goa) had a different form of religious politics as religious conversion was actively and often coercively promoted by Portuguese rulers. These areas thus had more significant numbers of religious converts primarily to Catholicism. See Frykenberg (2008) and Viswanathan (1998).

9. My point here is not of course that religions are homogeneous. My concern is with the ways in which state practices attempt to fix and stabilize religious categories. This rigidity is at odds with the actual variety and range of religious practices. Nevertheless, the definitions of religion and religious identity are shaped by state and legal processes of codification. See for example Gerald Larson's discussion of the ways in which Gandhi and Nehru contributed to the creation of what Larson calls a "neo Hindu" identity that operates as a new kind of Indic civil religion (Larson 1996, 201).

10. This is also closer to a Gramscian understanding of hegemony. Scholars such as Gail Omvedt and others have written at length about Ambedkar's thought and the relationship between caste and class. For the purposes of this article, I want only to point to Ambedkar's theoretical and political understanding of the ways in which religious hegemony shaped the exercise of state power within civil society. [In his essay on "Caste, Class and Democracy" he spoke of a form of upper caste hegemony (Brahmin-Bania) that would "divide the spoils which belong to the governing classes" (Ambedkar 2002, 148)]

11. He argues that in recent years these rulings have conformed to Hindu nationalist definitions of Hinduism. See Sen (2006). The discrepancy between the state's approach to the majority religion of Hinduism and minority religions such as Islam have provided a central source of political opposition from Hindu nationalist supporters. The state has thus engaged in reform of Hinduism with regard to personal laws but has sought to preserve the rights of minority religions by allowing minority communities to enforce religious-based personal law. This was crystallized in political anger over the well-known Shah Bano case. Shah Bano a Muslim woman was denied alimony under Islamic personal

law. She took her case to the Supreme Court and won alimony reversing the personal law judgment. Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government overturned the judgment in an act that was viewed as an attempt to gain electoral/political support from the Muslim community. The Shah Bano case was one of the central issues that the BJP used to accuse the Congress of being a "pseudo-secular" party. The demand for a uniform civil law in contemporary India has now paradoxically become associated with Hindu nationalist attempts to attack minority rights.

12. The movement has similarly constructed Muslim communities as anti-national. However, this ideological strategy has focused primarily on constructing Muslims as loyal to Pakistan rather than on identifying Muslims with conversion practices. More recently the movement has focused on constructing Muslims as potential terrorist threats. See Singh (2007).

13. This strategy was primarily centered on the Congress' defense of personal laws and the BJP's demand for a uniform civil code. As many critics and scholars have noted, the BJP's conception of a civil code in effect was rooted in Hindu conceptions. This is effect represents an extension of historical processes in which Gandhi sought to present distinct Indic traditions as national-Indian traditions. See Larson (1996).

14. As is widely known, this was most visibly demonstrated in the recent violence against Muslims in Gujarat. The successful re-election of Gujarat's Chief Minister Modi who is widely known to have used state structures and institutions to facilitate such violence illustrates that this has had the potential to produce some political success at the local level.

15. As is well known to scholars of contemporary India this centered on the controversial Mandal commission report that documented widespread caste discrimination and recommended government quotas for lower caste groups excluded from education and employment; The question of affirmative action policies (reservations in the language of Indian politics) continues to be a potent political issue in India.

16. Hansen effectively analyzes the micro-strategies that Hindu nationalist organizations have used. This includes material strategies (providing social services for poorer communities) and political strategies of mobilization that include setting up highly disciplined local organizations and stoking anti-Muslim sentiments (Hansen 1999).

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