

## Chapter 8

### Hindu Fundamentalism

#### CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM

Ayodhya, in Northern India, is alleged to have been the birthplace of the god Rama, the hero of the Hindu epic poem the *Ramayana*. For centuries the poem has been acted out during long evenings in Indian villages. More recently it has been broadcast on national television. In the fall of 1989, neighborhoods all over this huge country were making thousands of bricks and inscribing them with the names of their home states. They were to be sent to Ayodhya for the rebuilding of Rama's temple. Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the fundamentalist religious wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, led the campaign for the temple project. *The New York Times* reported:

Militant Hindus, ignoring historical scholarship and the doubts of moderate religious leaders, say that in 1528 the Mogul Emperor, Babar, built his mosque, the Babri Masjid, right over the spot where Rama was

born. They say he destroyed a Hindu temple, the Ram Janmabhoomi, in the process.<sup>1</sup>

The newspaper explained:

In India, where lines still often blur between history and legend, reality and myth, or politics and religion, a dispute over sacred ground claimed by Muslims and Hindus is regarded as a powder keg.<sup>2</sup>

Thousands of persons were killed throughout India in the struggle that this controversial project entailed. In 1986, a court in nearby Faizabad had ordered that the gates of the mosque at Ayodhya be unlocked and its premises made available for Hindu worship. The reason was that it allegedly was standing at the location of an earlier Hindu temple. Fundamentalists were aroused and became active on both sides. Decades earlier, on the night of 22–23 December 1945, Hindu idols had been smuggled into the mosque's shrine, and the place had become desecrated for Muslims. Whereas the Hindu cult is practiced with dramatic statues of deities, the Muslim sanctuary is in the full sense iconoclastic. Hindu fundamentalists have insisted that the mosque be torn down and replaced by a temple. Early in the summer of 1992 two thousand Vishwa Hindu Parishad volunteers began laying a 21-by-9-meter concrete base foundation. When on December 6, 1992, rioters broke through police lines and destroyed the three-story mosque with pickaxes and crowbars, India erupted in religious warfare.<sup>3</sup>

Factual questions about the actual lives of particular divine personages have not been a concern for most Hindus. Historical interest in the relation between symbol and occurrence, doctrinal truth and falsehood, is in many respects a Western phenomenon. Most Hindus take it for granted that Rama and Krishna—both regarded as incarnations of the high god Vishnu—once lived on earth. Moreover, the distinction between the human and the divine is not as radical and sharp as in Western monotheisms. The question is about not a God "beyond the world," but the sacred and divine within it. Hindu traditionalists, on this premise, continue to resist secularity. Fundamentalists assert themselves in a paradoxically defensive but aggressive integralism that, as in the case of Ayodhya, has become politically radicalized.

## TRADITIONS EAST AND WEST

Assuredly, the truly seminal Indian religious heritage encompasses a diversity of historical periods, with their different paradigms. The name *Hinduism* like the term *fundamentalism*, has been imported. The former is of Persian origin.

Originally, *Hindu* was applied by the Muslim invaders to identify what they found in India—a land of many rivers. *Hinduism* means literally “the belief of the people of India.” To the present, India is a vast museum of the history of religion, and different Hindu models generally are not sorted out in the same way as in the West. To the visitor to India, an all-pervasive sense of the sacred seems to be expressed in an endless landscape of temples and holy places, and some Westerners have found its sense of hierophany, the manifestation of holy power, more vital than their own.

The distinctively Hindu relationship between myth, philosophy, and religious doctrine differs from the Western theisms. Indian philosophers speak of a plurality of worlds that are not unified in a single rational pattern. A variety of polytheistic, henotheistic, monotheistic, monistic, and pantheistic interpretations exist together, side by side. The German philosopher Hegel spoke of a vast undifferentiated symbolism in India, reflecting chaos more than meaning.<sup>4</sup> Most historians of religion, today, find this judgment to be too severe.

Without a founder, Hinduism is not a single religion in the same sense as is Christianity, Islam, or even Buddhism. The question of fundamentalism turns rather on the nature of mythos. Is there a rationale? “However muddled, contradictory or extravagant [the mythos may be], there is a fragment of a logos,” Hans Küng has observed of the Hindu legacy. Küng is speaking against fundamentalism—not resolving all theological quandaries—when he writes: “Myths reveal deep structures of man and the world, space and time.” He adds that they provide a direction for life as well as saving power, in short, that they are paradigms for living. To construe them as historical facts, or to impose dogmatic truths in their name, is to misunderstand their meaning. Küng warns against a kind of “medieval conservative mystification” that can only promote unbelief among the educated. If myths are preserved uncritically in an unmythical age, in his judgment, the real content of religion suffers, and faith can degenerate into superstition.<sup>5</sup> This, indeed, is the real danger in fundamentalism.

## THE MYTHOS OF RELIGION IN INDIA

Spirit, not matter, has had priority in India. Philosophically, the Indian archetype is ascetic and idealistic as compared with, for example, Chinese or American realism (both of which have been, in the majority, more pragmatic). The Hindu mythos is exemplified in the symbol used to explain suffering and evil: the blind man carrying the lame man. Paradigmatically, the blind man represents nature and the lame man spirit. Life is a continual struggle in which even if nature finally seems to overcome spirit in death, spirit is not extinguished in its universal and cosmic dimensions. It endures even after an

individual's lifetime and in the end is the only really Real; everything else is illusion. Ultimate salvation is not only liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth but also final union with the spiritual One. To be sure, there are impersonal and more personalistic versions of deity and salvation; the latter is to be found in *bhakti* piety with its belief in incarnate savior gods.

India's many-sided religious past was researched empirically by Western archaeologists and linguistic scholars from the colonial period on. More recently, fundamentalists have appropriated their findings for their own nationalistic purposes. As we have already suggested, the Indian religious tradition has been seminal—so greatly so, that it is parent to a family of faiths. Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism all developed in the Hindu setting of the subcontinent.

Although the micromodels are plural and need to be distinguished in the more inclusive Hindu mythos, Western apocalyptic predictions, like notions of physical resurrection, seem too materialistic. From the Indian point of view, Western theistic views of history (such as premillennialism and fundamentalist versions of creation) foreshorten the historical time. The Indian outlook posits four great kalpas, or world ages, spanning millions and millions of years; humans are now living in the last and worst. It was in the Upanishadic period (600–200 B.C.E.) that the notions of birth and class were made determinant in Hindu philosophy.

David Bradley finds the predominant unifying conviction of religion in India to be that of reincarnation, of birth and rebirth in a series of lifetimes, a theme that came into prominence in the Upanishads.<sup>6</sup> How many gods are there? This question was asked orally by their authors long before it was set down in writing. The answer is that there seem to be many, but in reality all of the gods described mythologically (themselves subject to birth and rebirth) are finally only expressions of the ultimate Reality, the One behind the many.

Hindu apologists emphasize the inclusiveness of their religion. The path of *bhakti marga* (*marga* means "way") envisages salvation by faith. But salvation by works (*karma marga*) and salvation by philosophical insight (*jnana marga*) are also accepted. Christianity, less many-sided from the Hindu perspective, insists on *bhakti marga*. The Hindu outlook has been a "both/and" rather than an "either/or." Assuredly this puts the question of fundamentalism in a different setting than in the West.

Different levels are distinguished in the Hindu consciousness, as an idolatrous cultus and philosophical monism live side by side. The German scholar of Indian religion Heinrich von Stietencron observes:

To be sure, we also find demythologizing in the Hindu religions . . . by means of karma, and consequently through degrees of religious knowledge or experience of God. At the highest level of such

knowledge or experience, we also reach the highest level of abstraction. But this does not make lower levels inconsequential. Without them, the ascent that leads in the end to salvation would never have begun.<sup>7</sup>

## MOTHER INDIA

The new religious Right in India is not fundamentalist in the sense of being scripturalist. Norvin Hein writes: "Hindu theory upheld the Vedas [the early holy books] as superhuman, infallible, authoritative, but they [their defenders] had insufficient grasp of the circumstances of their origin to perceive what a literal interpretation would be."<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Hopkins, also a specialist in Hinduism, points out that fundamentalism in the Indian setting places little emphasis on the transcendent goals set forth in classic esoteric texts such as the Upanishads. Indeed, Hopkins's claim is that religious nationalism has no real basis in the authoritative scriptures revealed as *scruti*, "spoken in the ears of men by the gods." One must look elsewhere to explain fundamentalist phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

Hopkins has concluded that the fundamentalist unifying mythos is a powerful image of India as the sacred motherland—Mother India—a goddess embodied in the land, rivers, and sacred places of the subcontinent. For millennia villagers have honored the goddess as the protector of the village domain as well as the representative of natural powers, both benign and malevolent. Eventually, her mythos was absorbed into the larger religious tradition and interwoven with local and regional shrines, rivers, and other sacred places into a pilgrimage network that essentially defined the territory of the holy land of India.

Hopkins points out that the concept of sacred territory was not primarily political: The name *India* had not yet come into usage, and there was no central ruling power. Political power and territorial controls were highly fluid. Kingdoms and their dynasties rose and fell. Symbolic unity instead was in the landscape of India, a territory defined by its holy places. Practically, the real binding force was the law (*dharma*, sanctioned by the Brahman priests), stories, rituals, deities, and especially household and temple *puja* (worship) practices.

In principle, religious exclusivism is based not primarily on creed or ritual, but on whether Mother India is acknowledged as one's sacred place. Often included in the effective mythical image is the goddess as *Shakti* or power. Even today there are places where the village goddess still is worshiped with blood sacrifices. Living blood from decapitated animals is poured directly on the earth and offered to an image of her depicting one of her various forms as the personification of natural powers. This is a tradition very different from that of the Vedic fire sacrifices, in which the smoke ascended heavenward; the blood flows downward.

The Hindu fundamentalist mythos honors the warrior tradition, today exemplified in disciplined cooperation and loyalty as well as physical training. The holy land must be kept pure by a dedicated band of manly warriors who follow the *dharmā* of service and self-sacrifice. Hopkins emphasizes that this point of view runs counter to the more individualistic and transworldly goal of philosophical Upanishadic Hinduism. It does, however, have deep roots in Brahmanical texts on *dharmā*.

Originally, the truth of *dharmā*—law and structure—was set forth in the consensus of the elders of the local caste as moral and religious rules were enforced. The individual was enjoined to fulfill his or her role in life unselfishly and in particular to act without concern for the results of his action. Hopkins identifies fundamentalist roots in the teaching on family duty and kingship in the Dharma Shastras and in particular the Laws of Manu.

#### THE RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH MOVEMENT

The new religious Right in India is not limited to a single party or movement. The ideological and social forces at work are most evident in the growing merger between fundamentalism and nationalism in the activism of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Balirama Hedgewar. Hedgewar remained the authoritarian leader of the movement until his death in 1940. His successor, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (d. 1973), continued this movement in the same style that Hedgewar had established. Appealing to an idealized mythical past, the RSS seeks to revivify and recreate Hindu self-consciousness. The loss of national loyalty is seen as being responsible for contemporary impotence and decadence. The RSS believes that religious observance has a strong effect on sociopolitical conditions, a view accepted in traditional Hindu metaphysics.

The revivalist religious goal is to recover the fundamental truth disclosed in an earlier era of revelation. Even today, RSS considers it to be imperative that a correct society adhere to the principles of *dharmā*. A dynamic and more world-affirming view of *dharmā karma* is championed by these fundamentalists, who seek to replace local loyalties by new ones now directed to the Hindu "nation." Some commentators see a new unified "Greater Hinduism" emerging that joins these forces with nationalism in reaction against the West as well as against indigenous religions.

Walter Anderson and Shindhat H. Damle, writing in *The Brotherhood in Saffron, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak*, describe how

every morning at sunrise groups of men in military-style khaki gather outdoors before saffron flags in all parts of India to participate in a com-

mon set of rituals, physical exercises and lessons. For one hour each day in the year, they are taught to think of themselves as a family—a brotherhood—with a mission to transform Hindu society.<sup>10</sup>

By indoctrinating its followers, RSS seeks to inculcate self-control and identification with the group as well as religious zeal. Anderson and Damle write: "A system of myths, rites and symbols are intended to fuse the individual's identity to the larger Hindu community which the RSS claims to represent."<sup>11</sup> Cooperation and loyalty are expected. At the beginning, the RSS's aim was to develop a program that would give the moral, political, and intellectual strength necessary to achieve independence from Great Britain. After this goal had been reached after World War II (albeit not in the way that the RSS leadership had desired, that is, with the division of India and the separation of Pakistan), it then turned its attention to character and spiritual formation in the newly independent India.

For decades, the RSS leadership had distanced itself from politics—following a tradition that began with Hedgewar, who had given education and religion priority. It was not until the government actually banned the movement that the RSS turned to more direct political action, particularly through members active in affiliate organizations. It began training persons to work in the media and universities as well as in political parties themselves. As we noted, it is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the World Hindu Council), the religious and intellectual arm of the RSS, that has led the campaign to send bricks to Ayodhya, which has resulted in not only bitter controversy but violence and the loss of life.

Activists with an RSS background, united by their early *shakha* training, now work in a variety of activities and fields. The RSS training begins with preadolescents and becomes more explicitly ideological for adolescents. The purpose of such education is to develop a loyalty to country and religion that will remain with the individual throughout the rest of his or her lifetime, in short, that amounts to Hindu indoctrination. Leadership seeks to guide the way in which individuals work out the relation between themselves and society. Not everyone who begins training stays with the movement. Others, however, do develop lasting loyalties that significantly influence their future course in life. The RSS premise is that religious loyalty is necessary for individuals to achieve integrity and a sense of life purpose, especially in the midst of secularism and decadence. The strength and prosperity of the whole nation is seen as being dependent on this loyalty.

The RSS has increasingly gained new power and influence in the propagation of its mythos as it has challenged the establishment. Especially since the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, the Indian middle class—the part of the

population that has experienced modernization most of all—now increasingly finds fundamentalism a more tolerable alternative. Populist religious symbols are often used for reasons of political expediency. Earlier religious revival movements, the Arya Samaj and Brahamo Samaj, had denounced ritualism, idol worship, and various other external “obscurantist” observances of religion. Now *pujas* and processions are organized by fundamentalists in honor of a variety of gods and goddesses. The visible symbols of cult and mythology are promoted under RSS sponsorship.

The carefully designated RSS organizational structures are hierarchical. De jure authority is vested in the *karyavah*, or secretary, an older and respected person, but the young men, *mukhya shikshaks*, are the most active. For educational purposes, local *shakhas* are divided into four age groups: 6 or 7 to 10, 10 to 14, 14 to 28 and over 28. In addition to the local RSS office, there are city offices in the more populous areas, regional offices, and then state and central assemblies that meet once a year. The persons with the most power in the structure are known as *pracharaks*, and form a communication network outside of the official one. They have primary loyalty to the national RSS and are on loan from it. Generally well educated, they speak Hindi and English and are from upper-middle-class, urban backgrounds.

In the fundamentalist view, it is not politicians who represent the soul of the people, too often they lack real patriotism. The enlightened sage, the philosopher king, speaks for a higher authority beyond the ways of humanity as an interpreter of the national soul and higher law. The historian of Indian religion Heinrich Zimmer writes: “The perfected saint feels himself possessed by an illimited, far-reaching, all-pervading insight, which amounts actually to a faculty of omniscience.”<sup>12</sup> Such saints are credited as having ex cathedra qualities of infallible intuition by Hedgewar and Golwalkar. These two leaders, after their deaths, were even spoken of as *avatars*, divine incarnations.

Although the RSS is not the only source of Hindu fundamentalist sentiment, there is little doubt that it is a leading one. There are other right-wing parties, and characteristically they fight among themselves. The RSS cause, in particular, needs to be seen not just as a sporadic response to grievances but as part of a long-term strategy. The RSS was outlawed during the emergency declared by Mrs. Gandhi, as it had been earlier following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. But seen in broader perspective it has played a role as new political parties have developed. Even Congress Party members have acknowledged that this movement has become “indispensable.” Through a number of affiliates its influence is channeled in the press, on university campuses, and in political parties. However, by contrast, the hierarchically structured parent organization itself attempts to stay clear of politics whenever possible.

The new Hindu fundamentalist Right is not so much a rural phenomenon as a product of urban change. Communalism is a factor that figures most decisively in this development. Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, albeit minorities, seem to threaten the Hindu majority—in the fundamentalist view. At the same time, a specific group of people, culturally, and a territory (Hindu sacred space) are given priority and special religious significance.

M. S. Golwalkar, the second RSS leader, clearly spelled out the goals of this fundamentalism: "The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and religion, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, and must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture . . . claiming no privileges . . . not even citizens' rights."<sup>13</sup> Embree reports that more recently Sankaracharya, a prestigious figure in Hindu orthodoxy, made public speeches in which he argued that ritual pollution and the idea of untouchability are scripturally sanctioned.<sup>14</sup> Although his view did not find wide support, it was not often challenged directly, either.

Christians and Muslims as well as the Westernized elite, fundamentalists charge, have values that form a gulf between them and the community of Hindus. This is evident in their ways of life, language, script, dress, and their festival calendars. Golwalkar observes: "They (Muslims) look to some foreign lands as their holy places. They call themselves 'Sheiks' and 'Syeds.' Sheiks and Syeds are certain clans in Arabia. How then did these people come to feel that they are their descendants? That is because they have cut off all their ancestral national moorings of this land and mentally merged themselves with the aggressors. They still think that they have come here only to conquer and establish their kingdoms."<sup>15</sup>

A well-known pacifist couplet runs: "Shower flowers on the enemy who pricks you with a thorn." The militant revision is: "He who pricks you with a thorn, pierce him in return with a spike and teach him a lesson he won't forget." Discipline and order as well as Hindu religious commitment are seen as more necessary for national survival than tolerance by fundamentalists, who point out that it was Hindu revivalism that began the drive for independence and was its primary source. Religious mythos should not be relinquished once the goal of freedom had been reached.

Fundamentalists were disgraced and even outlawed when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. Now there is a different ethos in their favor, and they are in prominence. It is a widespread Hindu judgment that the legal privilege that Muslims have claimed, for example, in family law, is significantly a cause of the crisis. Muslims, often forming a voting block, have gained political influence. Professor Rajendra Singh, as general secretary of the RSS, commented: "It looks very strange that India is the only country in the world where a majority [Hindus] is ruled by a minority and no one can be considered the

Defender of the Hindu faith."<sup>16</sup> The RSS seeks to unite Hindus ideologically, and this with the help of religious mythology. The problem is that their community is not at all one; indeed, Hindus seem to be almost endlessly divided.

## THE HISTORICAL LEGACY

Fundamentalism, of course, must be evaluated against the religious history of the area. India is landlocked except for the mountain passes in the West. Following in its archetypal pattern, as we have noted, religious tradition has developed richly in a variety of models throughout its history while still maintaining its central mythos. A number of different paradigms from diverse periods live on. Fundamentalist sentiment looks to the popular epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Imbued with a warrior ethic and ideals of righteous rule, the epics emphasize protection of the people and preservation of the holy law. The stories of Rama, for example, like those about the god Krishna, exemplify activism and piety. The god Vishnu's role as the preserver of the social and cosmic orders also is widely affirmed. Indeed, the warrior kings, Krishna and Rama, are his incarnations. Not surprisingly, the means of arousing popular support are pilgrimages and renewal of sacred places, as at Ayodhya.

In the surge of the fundamentalist tide, the target is not so much the representatives of modernity as other religious groups; this is evident most of all in the increasing number of communal riots. Muslims and Christians as well as Sikhs are demonized. The situation is very different from earlier when liberal neo-Hindu leaders like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Gandhi, although nationalists, sought to purify the religion while at the same time claiming that the Hindu model was inclusive enough to include a place for all major faiths. Religious labels seemed only accidental to the reformers. Critics still see the present communal hostility as being caused partially by the complete inability of even these liberal Hindus to understand Muslims' and Christians' commitments to their own distinctive faiths and religious communities.<sup>17</sup> One reason is that the Hindu mythos, at the deepest level, is more radically individualistic, more concerned with transcending the social order, than Islam.

In the present agitation, centuries-old tensions between Hindus and Muslims, harking back to the Muslims' conquest of the subcontinent, are being intensified, becoming more explosive than ever, notwithstanding the division of the subcontinent between the Muslim theocratic state of Pakistan and the secular republic of India. When they conquered India, Muslims destroyed hundreds, indeed thousands, of statues of gods they regarded as idols. The invaders also razed hundreds of Hindu temples. Nevertheless, Muslims always remained

a minority, and as rulers they were never able to overcome, much less destroy, the living Hindu mythos. Hinduism continued to be a vast social system more than a unified community, and on its own terms resisted Muslim rule.

Hinduism has still succeeded in preserving its culture. More recently, the Hindu outlook has served as a barrier against Marxism. The powerful role of caste and of the hereditary priesthood in Hindu defense against Buddhism in earlier centuries and later against Islam is not to be understated, in spite of all modern democratic sentiments. Fundamentalists today still champion an aristocratic paradigm, even though there is no one central ruling authority comparable to a pope or caliph. In the face of growing diversity, they seek unity on the basis of a common Hindu mythos. At Ayodhya, for example, various parties of the priesthood could not agree on procedures and defense of their faith. Some of them stood to lose constituencies if Rama's temple were reopened to Hindu worship.

## MODERNIZATION

Early Hindu reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj were essentially movements against post-Vedic Hinduism of the type now championed by fundamentalists. A difficulty was that the early Indian nationalist movement could find no basis for political independence in earlier traditions of social *dharmā*, popular temples, images, *pūja*, devotionism, and pilgrimage. Only in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did a few Hindu leaders (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee [1838–94], author of the national anthem, "Bande Matram"; Bal Gangadhar Tilak [1856–1920], and, most powerfully, Mahatma Gandhi [1869–1948]) begin to tap the resources of popular Hinduism in developing the foundations of a broad-based indigenous nationalist movement.<sup>18</sup> It needs to be recognized that what emerged was a new creation. Traditional Hinduism had no concept of nationhood in contrast to kingdoms, and it allowed no scope for political activism to ordinary citizens. What was now offered was a new Hindu mythos suitable to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The philosophical-theological effort to make Hinduism more world affirming and open as well as activist is clear in the careers of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), neither of whom was a fundamentalist.<sup>19</sup> Aurobindo attempted to work out a synthesis of Hinduism and modern evolutionary thought. Both of these leaders reflected in the tradition of Advaita nondualist philosophy, drawing on the ideas of Shankara Archarya, the leading nondualist Vedanta thinker, who lived in the eighth and ninth centuries. Shankara's numerous commentaries on the Hindu scriptures have become classics, and he is still honored in his country today.

An important proposal for further revision of traditional views, made by Tilak even before India's independence, centered on what is perhaps the best-loved Hindu holy book, the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>20</sup> It was in fact a precursor of contemporary fundamentalism. In enunciating his view, Tilak dismissed the majority of earlier major commentaries on the *Gita* on the grounds that their emphasis on devotionalism and renunciation propagated a negative view of existence. Instead, he gave priority to the opening and closing passages of the *Gita* and its call for action. Today, one cannot simply accept Hinduism in the traditional sense: The individual must decide which duty is most appropriate.

A positive integration of Hindu religious thought in the twentieth century, no doubt, is to be found in the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>21</sup> Gandhi read the New Testament and the *Bhagavad Gita* together and refused conversion to Christianity. Seeking to renew Hinduism ethically in the modern world—especially in his criticism of caste—he still affirmed the ultimate unity of God and the soul as he led his nation into independence.

Gandhi spoke of his own utopian vision as *Ramrajya*, the kingdom of the god, Rama, and envisaged it as the rule of truth and justice for all human beings. Reinterpreting traditional views of the popular Scripture the *Bhagavad Gita* in a nonfundamentalist way, he opposed hereditary untouchability. Of course, Muslims often saw the call for *Ramrajya* as Hindu imperialism.

Gandhi's great achievement was to secure India's freedom from the British Empire without bloodshed. *Ahimsa* (noninjury) was a doctrine emphasized in particular by Jainism and Buddhism, and Gandhi was influenced by it even as he interpreted his own heritage selectively. His use of *satyagraha*, "truth force," with the means of fasting and nonviolent protest to bring pressure against injustice, was a centuries-old Indian technique.<sup>22</sup> Gandhi accepted the Hindu claim that divinity lies deeply within every human person. Premising the unity of Brahman and Atman, God and the soul, he made this affirmation the basis for his fight against injustice and even caste.

Of course, fundamentalism is the antithesis of the beliefs championed by Gandhi. There were direct links and hostilities: Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, knew Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, personally, and on occasion even traveled with him. Malik and Vajpeyi attribute the secularism of the new Indian republic more to Jawaharlal Nehru than to Gandhi.<sup>23</sup> Nehru premised humanism and secularism in his personal beliefs and social theory. In his judgment, science and nationalism would eventually overcome traditional religious communalism and obscurantism. This has yet to happen. By contrast, fundamentalism looks to the Hindu world that had emerged by early in the second millennium and persisted through both Muslim and British conquests.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the late philosopher president of India, interpreted tolerance and appreciation of other faiths—the spirit of Gandhi—as an

essential component of Indian nationalist ideology.<sup>24</sup> Ainslie T. Embree in *Utopias in Conflict: Religion and Nationalism in Modern India*, does not agree with his analysis either practically or theoretically. Embree points out that religious fundamentalist and nationalist movements often interact as they face the future.<sup>25</sup> Together they are linked to a state of mind that is utopian, Embree emphasizes:

Mircea Eliade has spoken of utopian thinking as characterized by "the desire to recover religious origins, and thus a primordial history," coupled with an emphasis on the renewal of old values and structures that testifies to "the hope of a radical *renovatio*."<sup>26</sup>

Embree is particularly skeptical of Hindu eclecticism:

This emphasis on Hindu tolerance as a determining feature of Indian civilization cannot, I think, be taken as accurate reading of Indian civilization in earlier periods, but its significance lies in its use as a hermeneutic device to serve the special social and political circumstances of nineteenth-and twentieth-century India.<sup>27</sup>

Embree argues that Indian civilization is neither absorptive nor eclectic: Most remarkable is its endurance and the persistence of its style and patterns.<sup>28</sup> Embree's conclusion is that what is now called "Hinduism" is no more tolerant than Christianity or Islam and has borrowed less from the surrounding world in which it lives than they have.

## EMBREE'S VIEW OF THE HINDU PARADIGM

Embree identifies five unquestioned assumptions that, reaffirmed by fundamentalists, still live on in the Hindu mythos. In short, they make up the basic archetype of classical Indian religious thought that fundamentalists now believe to be under attack.<sup>29</sup> Preserving its integrity over two and a half millennia, the paradigm already was beginning to become evident as early as 500 B.C.E. But the model is no more self-evident—simply "common sense"—than in any other setting when it is viewed in terms of the history of religions.

Hinduism, although claiming to be noncredal, is based on the following existential assumptions: (1) Time is not viewed as linear-progressive but as cyclical, repeating itself endlessly in cycles of vast duration, spanning thousands of millions of years. It has no beginning and end, and even the gods live and die in its endless cycles. (2) In this setting, Karma premises the return of the consequences of deeds in successive lifetimes. (3) Reincarnation is a parallel as-

sumption, the birth and rebirth of individuals in successive lifetimes. (4) Dharma (an Indian term with various definitions): law, life pattern, and doctrine is central. (5) A claim for many levels of truth also is presupposed throughout the model.

Embree finds that the last premise, the Hindu notion of there being many levels of truth, is most alien to Western thought and assuredly bears significantly on the interpretation of myth. The question about the relation between myth and fact, doctrinal truth and falsehood, is in many respects more Western than Hindu. Heinrich von Stietencron observes:

Westerners sometimes have the impression that myth constitutes a lower form of knowledge about God. They think it disguises more of the truth than it reveals, and hence religion must be demythologized. For the Hindu, by contrast, the myth veils the truth only when an ignorant person hears it, because he doesn't understand the language of the symbols. For the person with knowledge, it reveals more about God's nature and actions than mere abstract discourse can grasp, because it brings an element of dynamism into play. . . .

God speaks to man at every level.<sup>30</sup>

Embree believes that *dharma* is the most socially significant of all the listed characteristics of the Hindu mythos. The term is understood by Hindus as signifying law, morality, or social usage—a set of values, attitudes, and conduct that are expected of a person in society. Conformity to *dharma* is a specific obligation imposed on each individual by life. "Better to do your own duty badly than another's well."<sup>31</sup> Class, of course, significantly determines one's *dharma*; it is hereditary and established by birth.

Hindu mythology remains alive among the folk piety of the masses that fundamentalists seek to mobilize. Today, Benares, the holiest of Hindu cities, by the Ganges River, honors above all others the Hindu god Shiva. Depicted in his cosmic dance as creator, sustainer, and destroyer of worlds, Shiva exemplifies its mythos. His dance (in contrast to Western historicized myths of the Exodus or Christian eschatology) symbolizes the cyclical character of time as well as the unreality and illusory character of the world (*maya*). The god is often depicted with a string of skulls around his neck; he is the destroyer of worlds as well as the creator and source of life. Religious mythology is not so much to be transcended as enjoyed; the world is the play of the gods.

Inspired by their own *dharma*, Hindus resisted Muslim cultural penetration and later the Europeans, the Portuguese, and then the British. Even though Hindus showed new openness to European civilization by the nineteenth century, Embree doubts that the Hindu mythos will be able to form a synthesis

with modern science.<sup>32</sup> Fundamentalists, like their critics, Embree notes, lay claim to the Indian national goals of unity, social justice, political democracy, and secularism. However, they depart from modernism with respect to both means and ends. In short, their vision of the future, equally as utopian as that of the secular liberals, is a very different one.

Embree believes that fundamentalism's new power is not accidental.

The advocates for traditional religious values are not merely defending the past, nor are they reactionary in a simplistic sense. They are, on the contrary, profoundly radical, for they, quite as much as the modernizers, have a vision of the future they intend to work for. They have their own program of change and a blueprint.<sup>33</sup>

There are practical as well as theoretical issues. Even with its traditional reliance on class distinctions, Hinduism has been more diverse—not one religion but a variety of religions. Ashok Singhal, the present leader of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the World Hindu Assembly), explained during a visit to the United States that his movement is dedicated to unifying India's hundreds of sects: "There is no fighting among the sects; they live in harmony."<sup>34</sup> But they have never come together. In ten years, he predicts, Hindus will unify. Common Hindu principles and beliefs will make for unification. Then "they will be a force to be reckoned with in the world."<sup>35</sup>

Hopkins emphasizes that contemporary fundamentalism is significantly a response to the declining fortunes of earlier radical Hindu nationalist movements and an effort to preserve the cause in a more effective form. The continuity of symbols and mythos, as between earlier and later developments, is in an emphasis on a sacred motherland and the equation of disciplined manliness with religious virtue and concern to remove foreign intruders. The collection of symbols in the fundamentalist mythos is a relatively new creation in its present form. To be sure, the symbols all have roots, often deep roots in earlier life and thought, but their formation into a single religious-political mythos is more recent. Unlike Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj, earlier reform movements, the mythos as a whole had no clear scriptural foundation. In fact, it often appeals most of all to persons who have lost effective contact with the original meanings and sources of these symbols. Whether or not this is true of the leadership, it is the case with respect to the following on which mass support for fundamentalist movements depends.

Until the late 1970s, the major challenge to India's secular democracy came from linguistic movements and class conflict in the countryside and not from confessional politics. In the 1980s, Hinduism, once an "artifact of categorization," began to be a condition of national consciousness. What has been

described as a "new Great Hinduism" began to emerge. Religious celebrations began to be more strident and militant, transcending localities and acquiring national dimensions. A consciousness of a more homogeneous religion crossed class and sect boundaries, enhanced by the electronic media. In the 1980s the government began to patronize Hinduism as it had not before. The Janata party, which defeated Mrs. Gandhi in 1977, had initiated this strategy, and Mrs. Gandhi continued it when she returned to office.

The reasons underlying change were not only fanatical or fundamentalist. Hinduism seemed to provide a satisfying worldview and social identity. In states where Hindus were a minority and Christians, Sikhs, and Muslims appeared to be a threat, Hinduism embodied cultural nationalism. However, there were dangers. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph comment: "The lesson of partition that informed India's founding myth was that religious politics kills. What in India is called 'communalism' destroys civil society and the state."<sup>36</sup> India is a plural society today. Will it relearn the lesson of partition?

One of our questions has been whether the term *fundamentalism* applies to the diverse and pluralistic Hindu context. Does it still have relevance when taken from a Western monotheistic setting and introduced in the Eastern world? Today fundamentalist nationalists in India see mythos as being a greater unifying force than rational criticism. The key question continues to be how fundamentalist nationalists will relate to other parties in the secular republic. The short-term crisis is one of social order as well as economic development. The long-term crisis concerns the way in which a vast and diverse legacy (from the past history of religions—with its many-sided levels of insight and participation) will respond to the modern world. For it to be culturally relevant in the so-called postmodern era, how much must it be radically demythologized?