Chapter One

Religious Nationalism

Babar’s Mosque or Rama’s Temple?

The cover of the 15 May 1991 issue of India Today, India’s leading newsmagazine, shows Lal Kishan Advani, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), with bow and arrow in hand, vermillion on his forehead. His posture, immediately recognizable to all Hindus, imitates that of the icon of kodanda Rama, the god Rama with bow and arrows. In the national elections of May and June 1991, in which 511 seats were contested, Advani’s party won 119 seats and 20 percent of the vote. This meant that the BJP had nearly doubled its share of the national vote and had emerged as India’s largest opposition party by far.1 Perhaps even more significant, it won the state elections and formed a government in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state of some 100 million people.

The political success of the BJP depends squarely on its alliance with two Hindu nationalist movements, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization of religious leaders, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant youth organization. This alliance allows it to use religious discourse and mass-scale ritual action in the political arena. The party’s program stresses Hindutva, Hinduness, a term explored by the Hindu nationalist leader V. D. Savarkar in the 1920s: “A Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharat Varsha, from the Indus to the Seas, as his Father-Land as well as his Holy-Land that is the cradle of his religion.”2 The term Hindutva equates religious and national identity: an Indian is a Hindu—an equation that puts important Indian religious communities, such as Christians and Muslims, outside the nation.
The argument for the term stresses that Hindus form the majority community in the country and that, accordingly, India should be ruled by them as a Hindu state (*rashtra*).

All this is not new. From its very beginning in the nineteenth century nationalism in India has fed upon religious identifications. This is true not only for the two most important religious communities in India, Hindus and Muslims, but also for groups like the Sikhs and, in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists. In all these cases nation building is directly dependent on religious antagonism, between Hindus and Muslims, between Sikhs and Hindus, between Buddhists and Hindus. At Independence this antagonism led to the most important political event of twentieth-century South Asian history, the formation of Pakistan as a homeland for Indian Muslims. This history also provides the background to the issue that was responsible for the recent success of the BJP: a dispute between Hindus and Muslims over a building in the city of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh.

In the North Indian pilgrimage center of Ayodhya is an old mosque, known as the Babari Masjid, which was built in 1528 by a general of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty. The dispute centers on a local (hi)story, according to which the mosque was built to replace an even more ancient Hindu temple to the god Rama, which had occupied the spot from the eleventh century A.D. The temple commemorated the place where Rama, the god-hero of the great epic poem the *Ramayana*, had been born. After destroying the temple, the general built his mosque, using carved pillars that had been taken, the story goes, from the temple ruins. I heard this story when I visited Ayodhya for the first time in 1977. The British also recorded it when they took control over the city. After the annexation of the regional realm—to which Ayodhya gave its name (Awadh)—in 1856, the British decided to put a railing around the mosque and to raise a platform outside on which Hindus could worship, while Muslims were allowed to continue their prayers inside.

This situation seems to have continued until Independence. Following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Indian government placed a guard outside the mosque, which was now declared out of bounds for both communities. However, during the night of 22 to 23 December 1949 an image of Rama was placed in
the mosque by a group of young Hindus, who have never been caught and tried. The next day a rumor spread quickly that Lord Rama had appeared in the form of an image to claim the mosque as his temple. Riots ensued, which were quelled by the army, but the image was never removed. Leaders of both Hindu and Muslim groups subsequently filed suits to claim the place as theirs.

In 1984 the Vishva Hindu Parishad, a Hindu nationalist movement, began to demand that the lock on Rama’s birthplace be opened. *Tala kholo!* (“Open the lock!”) was their battle cry. A procession started out from Sitamarhi (the birthplace of Sita, Rama’s wife), reaching Ayodhya on Saturday, 6 October 1984. The procession consisted of little more than a few monks in private cars and a truck bearing large statues of Rama and Sita under a banner inscribed with the slogan *Bharat mata ki jay* (“Hail to Mother India”). The next day, VHP leaders and local abbots made speeches in Ayodhya. But none of this was very impressive. When the procession arrived at the state capital, Lucknow, however, it attracted considerably more attention. From Lucknow the procession moved on to Delhi, where the VHP intended to stage a huge rally, but it was caught in the aftermath of the murder of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, which turned national attention away from the Ayodhya issue. Nevertheless, in the following years the VHP continued to put pressure on politicians, which resulted in a decision by the district and session judge of Faizabad on 14 February 1986 that the disputed site should be opened immediately to the public. This decision triggered off communal violence all over North India, and on 30 March 1987 Muslims staged in New Delhi their biggest protest since Independence.

After the decision by the Faizabad judge the temple-mosque issue came to occupy an increasingly central position in the platforms of various political parties, ultimately playing an important role in the elections of 1989. Even the leader of the Congress party, the late Rajiv Gandhi, who was then leader of the opposition, insisted in a rally in Faizabad-Ayodhya that he supported the VHP case. But the issue was made absolutely central by the Bharatiya Janata party. At least from this point onward—and probably already in 1986—the political agenda of the BJP cannot be separated from that of the VHP. There is a direct coordination of rituals, agitation, and political maneuvering by the high command of the BJP, the
RSS, and the VHP—who in fact overlap to a significant degree. Vijaye Raje Scindia is a vice president of the BJP and a leader of the VHP; Lal Kishan Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee are leaders of the BJP but have a background in the RSS; an important leader of the RSS, Manohar Pingle, has the VHP in his portfolio. Significantly, the VHP leadership also draws extensively on the experience of retired members in the higher echelons of the Indian bureaucracy, such as former director-generals of police, former chief judges, and former ministers: it is not simply an “extremist” organization, far removed from the mainstream of Indian society. Obviously, the support of persons with strong links to the bureaucracy is critical in the planning and execution of mass-scale demonstrations.

Beginning in September 1989 the VHP engaged in the worship of the “bricks of Lord Rama” (ramshila) in villages across North India, organizing processions to bring these sacred bricks to Ayodhya, where they would be used to build a temple on the site of Rama’s birthplace, in place of the mosque of Babar. It is estimated that some three hundred lives have been lost in connection with these “building processions.” The heaviest casualties occurred in Bihar, where the Muslim population of the town of Bhagalpur was almost wiped out. Ultimately, the VHP was allowed to lay its foundation stones in a pit outside the mosque on so-called undisputed lands. Remarkably, some of the stones most prominently exhibited come from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and South Africa, as if to emphasize the transnational character of this nationalist enterprise.

In 1990 there were two major political developments that affected the course of action regarding Ayodhya. In the first place, the Kashmir issue flared up again, bringing with it such unprecedented violence against the Hindu population that large groups of people were forced to leave that part of the country. The BJP took a strong anti-Pakistan stance on the situation in Kashmir—and, in India, this is always related to an anti-Muslim stance. Second, in September, V. P. Singh’s government decided to implement an earlier report of the Mandal Commission that suggested a considerable increase in the number of places reserved for the so-called backward castes in educational institutions and government service. These reservation policies are among the most important political instru-
ments in the modern Indian state. In South India these policies have led to the result that the great majority of the population is now listed as "backward." In northern and western India the policies have resulted in large-scale violence, which in a number of cases (Ahmedabad in 1985, for example) escalated into Hindu-Muslim riots.

Following the Mandal decision, widespread antireservation riots took place, during which a large number of students immolated themselves in what was for India a new form of protest. Since the agitation around the reservation issue imperiled the Hindu agenda of the VHP/BJP/RSS, Lal Kishan Advani, the leader of the BJP, decided to start a ritual procession that would pass through ten states—from Somanatha, in Gujarat, to Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh—with the goal of constructing the new temple to Rama on 30 October. Advani's posturing as Rama, with which this chapter opened, took place in the context of this campaign. His initiative met with great enthusiasm all over the country. Members of a recently established youth branch of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, offered a cup of their blood to their leader to show their determination. All this ignited a kind of time bomb, which ticked louder with every mile taken in the direction of Ayodhya. Mulayam Singh Yadav, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, took a vow that he would not allow Advani to enter Ayodhya, and indeed, before 30 October, Advani was arrested in the neighboring state of Bihar by Chief Minister Laloo Yadav's government. This did not prevent Advani's followers from marching to the mosque, but they were stopped when the police opened fire. To appreciate the firm stance of the two chief ministers, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Yadav, who were backed by V. P. Singh's central government, one has to take into account that they are low-caste leaders of an upwardly mobile backward caste—yadav is a synonym of ahir, "shepherd"—that would benefit considerably from the implementation of the Mandal report. Moreover, V. P. Singh and his colleagues allied themselves with the prevailing tradition of institutional secularism. The government of India could not allow the radical alienation of its Muslim population by an attack on the Ayodhya mosque. Notwithstanding all the political strategy involved, then, the secularism of the state was at stake. It is highly doubtful that a Congress government would have acted in a different
manner. Nevertheless, the actions taken by V. P. Singh’s government resulted in its loss of the BJP’s support in parliament and its subsequent fall on 16 November.

The VHP continued its agitation with a highly effective video and audio cassette campaign on the events in Ayodhya on 30 October. According to its claims, thousands have been killed by the police and the evidence suppressed. The bones and ashes of Ayodhya’s martyrs were carried in special ritual pots (asthi kalashas) throughout the country before finally being immersed in sacred water. In Ayodhya itself a major ritual sacrifice (mahayajna) was sponsored by the VHP, with Vijaye Raje Scindia as the principal sacrificer.

As we have seen, this ritual campaign led to the BJP’s electoral success in 1991 and to a BJP government in Uttar Pradesh. The problem then shifted to a standoff between the union government, formed by the Congress party, and the state government of Uttar Pradesh, formed by the BJP, the main national opposition party. This delicate situation was exacerbated by the fact that the VHP, which is relatively autonomous from the BJP, continued to press for a swift demolition of the mosque and building of the temple. There were signs that the BJP wanted to distance itself somewhat from the VHP, since it feared that the government might remove the BJP from power in Uttar Pradesh if it failed to restrain the VHP. At the same time, the VHP single-mindedly pursued its goal.

In 1992 the government of India, formed by Congress (I), attempted to resolve the issue by organizing direct negotiations between the VHP and the Muslim Babari Masjid Action Committee, but these negotiations proved fruitless. Then, on 6 December 1992, a rally in Ayodhya, organized by the VHP and the BJP, resulted in an attack on the mosque and its subsequent demolition. Although BJP leader Lal Kishan Advani, who was present at the site, immediately tried to distance himself from the act of demolition, there can be little doubt that the entire event had been well planned in advance.

The government of India took some strong action in response, imposing president’s rule in Uttar Pradesh immediately after the demolition. This was followed by the dismissal of BJP governments in Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan. India’s prime minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, expressed the government’s inten-
tion to rebuild the mosque. Finally, the government decided to ban several Hindu organizations, such as the RSS, the VHP, and the Bajrang Dal, which had played leading roles in the demolition campaign. These decisions were challenged by the BJP’s attempt to organize a huge rally at the Boat Club in Delhi on 25 February 1993, which the government banned and successfully prevented from taking place.

Despite these vigorous actions by the government, the destruction of the mosque provoked immense communal violence, especially in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Surat, and Calcutta. More than a thousand people—most of them Muslims—were killed in Bombay alone. The pogroms in Bombay were led by the Shiv Sena, a fanatic Hindu political party active in the Bombay region, which, although banned, was, according to a number of reports in English-language news media, actively supported by the Bombay police force. 3 The participation of the police in the attacks on Muslims has also been documented in other areas, such as the east Delhi neighborhood of Seelampur. 4 The events in India had, moreover, international repercussions. They were followed by riots in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Muslims in these countries as well as in Great Britain setting fire to Hindu temples in retaliation.

Religious issues, such as the temple-mosque controversy, generate passionate feelings and violent action. A common fallacy is that these passions are “natural” and that the violent struggle is an explosion of pent-up feelings. I want to argue that, although passions are certainly involved, their very “naturalness” is produced by a political process. The temple-mosque controversy did not evoke strong feelings between 1949, when the image of Rama was installed, and 1984, when the VHP started its agitations. By transforming the mosque in Ayodhya from a local shrine into a symbol of the “threatened” Hindu majority, however, the VHP has been instrumental in the homogenization of a “national” Hinduism. This is not to say—as it often is—that this kind of religious controversy is only a smoke screen, behind which we can find the “real” clash of material interests and social classes. Nor is it simply a political trick conjured up by leaders for their own benefit. Such arguments simply overlook the importance of religious meaning and practice in the construction of identity. What we have to understand is how certain issues are promoted as “naturally” crucial to the “self-respect”
of a collectivity that is portrayed as a homogeneous whole, as if it were an individual. If we want to penetrate the very real passions and violence evoked by the temple-mosque controversy, we must understand how this controversy is related to fundamental orienting conceptions of the world and of personhood, which are made sacrosanct. This implies that we have to analyze not only the ideologies that produce these conceptions but also the historical context in which they are produced.

Before the VHP started its campaign, Ayodhya had already been adopted in a scheme to promote indigenous tourism that included the building of hotels and the publication of tourist information, which would be made available in India’s many tourist offices. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the spirit of pilgrimage has been replaced by that of state-sponsored tourism, but it is an important development that politicians have decided the state should provide for the middle-class needs of those on pilgrimage. Beginning in 1985 the state government of Uttar Pradesh embarked on an ambitious and extremely expensive scheme to beautify the waterfront of Ayodhya’s sacred river, the Sarayu. In the middle of the stream a platform was raised, which can be reached from the bank of the river. Called “Rama’s Footstep,” it is an imitation of a similar platform in the Ganges at Hardwar. Likewise, the involvement of the state government of Uttar Pradesh in the decision of the Faizabad judge to unlock the mosque can clearly be interpreted as a move in a struggle for the control over Hindu places of pilgrimage, which are more and more included in middle-class tourist itineraries.

A parallel development is the success of religious stories in Indian cinema and, more recently, on Indian television. In South India movie actors have for some time been leading politicians, setting the stage for a cinematic populism through the use of religious imagery. This has now become a trend throughout the country. Playing a saint or god in a movie qualifies a person for saintliness or godliness on the political stage. Besides that, there is clearly a penchant among the public for the struggle between good and evil on the screen, which, in the past, was satisfied with nonreligious themes. But the new discovery is the dramatization of religious tales. A major event in the history of Indian television was undoubtedly the broadcasting of the Ramayana in the form of a serial rivaling the length of “Dallas” or “Dynasty,” starting in January 1987. This
has done more than anything else to make a standard version of the epic known and popular among the Indian middle class. Moreover, it greatly enhanced the general public's knowledge of Ayodhya as Rama's birthplace and therefore as one of the most important places of pilgrimage in Uttar Pradesh. In this way the controversy concerning the mosque built "on Rama's birthplace" has become an issue that is highly loaded with affect in the popular imagination.

For Muslims the issue has also become loaded. First of all, a mosque is sacred space. It cannot simply be demolished or removed. The very idea that a mosque should make room for a temple, in which images are worshiped, sounds like an utter defeat of Islam and is therefore highly repugnant to Muslims. Second, there is the (hi)story according to which Babar was involved in the building of the mosque. This provides even more reason for at least some Muslims to demand its preservation, since their pride and self-esteem is bound up with the glorious past of the Mughal empire. The decline of that empire is often construed as the decline of the Muslim community itself. In the Muslim view, the "facts" of this glorious past stand squarely opposite to the "fictions" of Hindu mythology. Babar and his general were historical figures and the mosque obviously a real building, while Rama and his birthplace are myths. The great importance of the Shi'a nawabs for the expansion of Ayodhya as a Hindu center is as much underplayed by Sunni Muslims as by Hindus. The idea that the period of the Mughal empire's decline was at the same time the golden era of the nawabs of Awadh is too much connected with Shi'a-Sunni strife to be considered in the construction of a Muslim history.

As far as the demolition of the temple is concerned, two different opinions are heard among Muslim leaders. The more radical version denies that there ever was a temple. In fact, it tries to deny the whole history of Hindu oppression by Muslims, calling it a Hindu fiction. The other version accepts the demolition of the temple as a historical fact but argues that Muslims had the duty to destroy places where icons were worshiped in a country that was under their sovereignty. Once it was built, the mosque became a consecrated place for them, which everyone had to respect. In their argument, a secular state must protect the right of religious minorities and cannot reverse events that happened almost five hundred years ago on the basis of majority sentiments. For Muslims the
mosque is a symbol of their glorious past but also of their threatened present.

While much of the Muslim response is indeed a reaction to initiatives taken by the Vishva Hindu Parishad, their position is not simply that of a beleaguered minority. Undoubtedly, the situation of the Muslim minority, who make up around 12 percent of the Indian population, cannot be properly understood without taking its relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh and with the wider Muslim world into consideration. In the construction of the Muslim “other” by Hindu nationalist movements, Muslims are always referred to as a dangerous “foreign element,” as not truly Indian. The partition of 1947, as well as the events both leading up to and following it, have given this construction a strongly “realistic” aspect. First of all, the traumatic experiences of partition stirred up long-standing feelings of distrust. Second, such feelings have not been allayed by the subsequent history of unfriendly relations between India and Pakistan, which has led to a series of wars and other, more minor hostilities. In these events Indian Muslims could easily be portrayed as a foreign hand weakening India from inside. Third, the growth of labor migration (largely Muslim) to the Middle East, these laborers sending their remittances back to India, as well as the support given by countries in the Middle East to Islamic institutions and even to missionary activities in India, have again reinforced the foreignness of Indian Muslims in the eyes of some of their fellow citizens. Moreover, the assertion of Islamic identity in the politics of nearby states also awakens old fears among Hindu politicians. Finally, there is a perception of the Muslims as a homogeneous community, since they are seen to vote in elections as a bloc. As a result of all this, Muslims are readily stereotyped as a foreign element in Indian culture and society. When in power, they oppressed Hindus; now, out of power, they continue to withhold fundamental rights from the Hindus via the democratic system, as well as to act as the agents of pan-Islamism on Indian soil.

The temple-mosque controversy in Ayodhya has thus become a symbolic focus of Hindu and Muslim identities within the Indian nation-state. Hindu nationalism demands that the state be the instrument of the political will of its Hindu majority, and its choice of actions gives Muslims a justified feeling of being an endangered minority. It does not seem exceptional that it is the control over
religious centers as material embodiments of beliefs and practices that is so crucial in religious nationalism. Similar controversies take place between Hindus and Jains in western India, and between Tamil Hindus and Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. I would also include in this category the many examples of attempts by the state to control religious centers, such as the gurdwaras—and especially the Golden Temple—of the Sikhs, the Hindu temple complexes in South India, and the Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Moreover, it seems that this kind of contest is not only typical for the Indian case but for religious nationalism in general. One could cite many examples here, but let me refer only to one well-known bone of contention, Jerusalem’s Temple Mount/har habayit/al-haram al-sharif.

Sacred centers are the foci of religious identity. They are the places on the surface of the earth that express most clearly a relation between cosmology and private experience. A journey to one of these centers is a discovery of one’s identity in relation to the other world and to the community of believers—a ritual construction of self that not only integrates the believers but also places a symbolic boundary between them and “outsiders.” This is not an unambiguous boundary, however, but a contested and negotiated one. It allows for negotiation, revision, and reinterpretation, signaled, in the study of religion, by such terms as conversion, syncretism, or reform. The ambiguities of these terms are those of the social process of boundary maintenance.

Although it is in the nature of religious discourse and practice that sacred centers are alleged to transcend history, it is clear that, over the course of religious history, they are “invented”—“found” as well as “founded”—and also “lost” or “declining.” Control over sacred centers and ritual action is not only crucial for the power of religious elites but is a source of continuous struggle between religious movements. The important role played by sacred centers in the construction of religious communities in India is continued in the construction of Hindu and Muslim nationalism. However, many students of nationalism will object that there is no such thing as religious nationalism—that, in fact, it is a contradiction in terms, since the nation-state is a secular entity. The notion that religious nationalism is somehow flawed or hybrid is at the heart of the discourse of modernity, which divides societies into “modern” and “traditional.” But the connection between secularism and national-
ism is a product of the Enlightenment. Before we can even try to understand Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in India, then, we must examine this connection in some depth—a discussion that will lead us into the problem of the colonial-orientalist impact on India.

The Great Divide

The temple-mosque controversy highlights the issue of the viability of secularism in contemporary Indian society. More than forty years after the founding of a secular state, Indian intellectuals, facing controversies such as that in Ayodhya, increasingly question the desirability of secularism as a basis for state policy. One argument by the anthropologist T. N. Madan runs as follows: Secularism is a value that developed in connection with Protestantism and individualism. In Protestantism salvation is an individual concern, rather than being mediated by the church, as in Catholicism. Combined with the rationalism of modern science, Protestantism has thus given rise to a secularizing process. Modernization theory then made this particular Western development into a universal feature of the transition from a "traditional" to a "modern" society. However, despite rapid industrialization and urbanization, as well as the spread of educational institutions—all aspects of "modernization"—secularization has not been very successful in India. Instead, there is a rapidly growing religious activism in politics. This being the case, T. N. Madan suggests that India's religious traditions should be protected from "secularist" attacks and used for the construction of an Indian nation-state that would not be alienated from Indian culture.₉

I am in general agreement with this line of argument, and I want to pursue it somewhat further. However, Madan's suggestion ignores the extent to which Hindu religious traditions have, from the start, been creatively used for the construction of the idea of an Indian nation. Therefore, he cannot avoid the question of which traditions should be protected and used for the construction of a truly Indian nation-state. One has to acknowledge that some of these traditions are mutually antagonistic and thus have to be managed, rather than simply protected. Moreover, I do not see much evidence of a ruthless state policy to secularize Indian society. The problem is rather the state's diminishing capability to arbitrate
conflicts, such as the temple-mosque controversy, in a society characterized by a plurality of cultures. Nevertheless, Madan is right in suggesting that to understand the specific ways in which the idea of the nation is adopted in discourse about Indian society we have to get away from the tyranny of modernization theory. The secular nation-state as sign of modernity must be recognized as an ideological notion, which can be contested by other notions. Modernization theory attempts to show that a particular blueprint of "the" modern nation-state is the inevitable outcome of the history of capitalism; its attraction lies precisely in its mixture of historical facts and social ideals. Before we can understand the internal Indian debate on the nation, then, we have to deconstruct discourse about the relation among modernity, secularism, and nationalism.

Anthropological discourse about nationalism relies heavily on a particular conceptualization of historical developments in Europe. The emergence of the European nation-state is commonly seen to depend on three connected processes of centralization: "the emergence of supra-local identities and cultures (the 'nation'); the rise of powerful and authoritative institutions within the public domain (the 'state'), and the development of particular ways of organizing production and consumption (the 'economy')."9 In a recent study, Ernest Gellner connects these three processes in a characteristically sweeping manner.10 He argues that modern industrial society depends on economic and cognitive growth, which, in its turn, requires a homogeneous culture. A crucial factor is the centralization of resources by the state in order to run an educational system that can instill a standardized, literacy-based "high" culture. The industrial division of labor is an objective imperative for a shared culture, that is, nationalism, and nationalism holds together an anonymous, impersonal society made up of mutually substitutable, atomized individuals.11 That culture is by definition secular, since economic and cognitive growth is only possible when the absolutist cognitive claims of the earlier agrarian (namely, preindustrial) age are replaced by open scientific inquiry.12 The industrial transformation of an agrarian world thus brings a nationalism that comes packaged with individualism and secularism.

Gellner's argument is not limited to European history but purports to offer a sociological analysis of what modernization entails everywhere in the world. Though the industrial transformation and
the emergence of nationalism occurred first in Europe, it was spread to the rest of the world via colonialism, namely, the expansion of the European industrial society. As Sally Falk Moore rightly observes in her thorough critique of Gellner's position, his argument contains a teleological assumption: the coming of nationalism may not be smooth everywhere, but, in the end, nationalism definitely will come and yield the fruits of modernity.13

Of course, it is plausible that there are significant relations between the emergence of an industrial economy and the gradual homogenization of culture through a state-controlled education system. But Gellner exaggerates the universal success of homogenization and simplifies its nature. Gellner's argument subsumes a variety of local histories under the mechanical laws of a universal history. The history told by Gellner unfolds all by itself, independent of human agency. It is the story of the victory of a fetishized historical force, capitalism, which celebrates objective imperatives and ignores meaningful and innovative action by the individuals and groups who make history in everyday life. Gellner pays little attention to the contradictions of homogenization or to the forms of resistance it meets. The basic flaw of the modernization theory espoused by Gellner, as well as that of many Marxist analyses of the expansion of capitalism, is the assumption that a shared culture (or ideology) is necessary to integrate the social system. While it can be seen that both the social constraints of the division of labor and the physical constraints of political force to some extent produce what we can call a "social order," there is no need to assume that the social order depends on common culture and moral consensus.14

It should be clear that centralization and homogenization create their own counterforces. There is an internal dynamic in these processes such that what is at one point an antinational rebellion may become, at another, a successful nationalist movement that results in the formation of a nation-state. There is not much reason to believe that this process will eventually reach a saturation point. Nor is it sufficient to speak, as Gellner does, of entropy-resistant traits, such as, for instance, race, that are barriers to mobility and equality and can thus become politically important.15 In other words, the centralizing force of nation building itself sprouts centrifugal forces that crystallize around other dreams of nationhood: nationalism creates other nationalisms—religious, ethnic, linguistic, sec-
cular—but not a common culture. The modernization paradigm makes too much of homogenization, while it overlooks “antagonization” and “heterogenization.” The forging of identity always simultaneously creates diversity.

Gellner’s text is important, though, in that it presents a picture of nationalism that is typical for an entire commonsense way of thinking. Crucial is the way in which the secular nation-state is presented as a sign of modernity. To a considerable extent the discussion of nationalism is thus narrowed down to the dichotomy between “traditional” and “modern.” Tradition is what societies have before they are touched by the great transformation of capitalism—and what seems to characterize “traditional” societies most is that they are under the sway of “religion.” Such a misleading conception is also fundamental to Benedict Anderson’s ground-breaking discussion of nationalism. According to Anderson, nationalism appeared when the two large cultural systems that had preceded it—the religious community and the dynastic realm—disappeared. In his view, the great sacral cultures with their sacred languages—Latin, Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Chinese—made religious communities such as Christendom and the Islamic umma imaginable, inasmuch as the religious specialists who mediated between Latin and the vernacular, for example, according to a medieval conception of the world shared by virtually everyone, also mediated between heaven and earth. Nationalism as a “modern” phenomenon could only arise from the ruins of a “traditional” world, characterized by a religious worldview, by religiously imagined communities (using sacred languages), and by hierarchically structured dynastic realms under the rule of a sacred king.

Anderson and Gellner both present a view of the traditional predecessor of modern culture that is typical for an entire sociological tradition dealing with the great transformation brought by capitalism. The first difficulty with Anderson’s argument is similar to one we have already encountered in our discussion of Gellner. Anderson often slips, almost unwittingly, from an interpretation of European history into the elusive category of world history: “In a word, the fall of Latin exemplified a larger process in which the sacred communities integrated by sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralized, and territorialized.” And...
gin—were pirated by colonial nationalists in the second half of the nineteenth century. The relation between this idea and the argument that "traditional" cultural conceptions had to disappear "first in Western Europe, later elsewhere" before nationalism could arise remains unclear. On the one hand, we have the specific impact of colonialism, which is barely discussed; on the other, there is the modernization of Europe, which is universalized.

As I have shown above, the major problem with this kind of argument is that it is based upon an ahistorical and essentializing treatment of culture as either "traditional" or "modern." I want to illustrate my objections with a short discussion of the jajmani system, a classic topos of the tradition-modernity dichotomy in the study of India. This system is often seen as a "moral economy" fundamentally different from the modern "rational economy," or capitalism. What is described in the literature as "the jajmani system" is a system of exchange in Indian villages, confined to highly local arenas, whereby high-caste landowning families called jajmans are provided ritual and nonritual services by lower castes in exchange for products of the land (shares of the "grain heap"). According to the anthropologist Louis Dumont, who stresses complementary rights and the hierarchical interdependence of castes, this system is hierarchically oriented to the collectivity as a whole. Moreover, "This view of an ordered whole, in which each is assigned his place, is fundamentally religious." In Dumont's view, then, "traditional" society in India is characterized by a religious ideology that encompasses a politicoeconomic domain.

Despite the considerable controversies surrounding Dumont's theory of the Indian caste system, anthropologists and historians have in general accepted the idea that India's jajmani economy is determined by traditional cultural conceptions. Nevertheless, there is quite a good deal of awkward evidence to show that the jajmani system as the economy of "traditional" India is largely a myth. This evidence—of the use of money, of the existence of property and of a market in landed property, of considerable labor migration, of great regional differences in precolonial and early colonial India—is either not considered at all or is presented as "peripheral" or "external," and thus not interfering with the fundamentally "autarkic" nature of village economy. According to Frank Perlin, in