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**Mediated Nationalisms and 'Islamic Terror':  
The Articulation of Religious and Postcolonial Secular Nationalisms in  
India<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Drawing on Mahmood Mamdani's analysis of the 'good Muslim-bad Muslim' dichotomy within American political and cultural discourse, this article analyses Hindu nationalists' violent campaigns against India's Muslim minority through a discussion of the reportage of two significant instances of this violence in Indian English-language newspapers. To explain the contradictory responses of the Indian press to these instances, the article argues that the prevalent liberal consensus of Indian nationalism, of which the press is a part, is responsible for the ambiguity that characterises mainstream responses to majoritarian violence against Muslims.

Current trajectories in Indian politics are usually traced to the watershed period of the late 1980s and early 1990s which witnessed both the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy and the emergence and rapid rise of explicitly political organisations that espouse Hindutva ('Hinduness'), a self-defined ideology of Hindu supremacy and cultural nationalism<sup>2</sup>. The co-evolution of these two phenomena has linked them together in unexpected ways, but while economic 'liberalisation' is understood as a policy integrating India more closely into a capitalist world-economy, the religious nationalist ideology of Hindu supremacy would appear to have the opposite effect in rhetorical terms. However, as this essay argues, Hindutva has also served to integrate India into the current cultural logic of US imperialism premised on a permanent conflict with 'Islamic' terrorism. This relationship has been most sharply fore-grounded by the American response to the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York. The mediation of this response and of subsequent events in the Indian English-language press serves to illustrate the enmeshing of Indian nationalism within the American imperialist project in Asia.

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But on another plane the contradictions in this narrative also foreground a tension between two variants of postcolonial Indian nationalism: between a secular liberalism identified with Nehruvian Third World nationalism, and the majoritarian Hindu supremacist ideology symbolised by Hindutva. The distinction and contradiction between them is best understood, as I argue, in their relationship to Islam, and to Muslim citizens.

The mediation of Indian nationalism in recent years has been punctuated by several key events. I focus on two instances immediately following the September 2001 attacks in the United States which have shaped nationalist discourses and which highlight the tension I mentioned earlier. Both occurred while the Indian national government was controlled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political front of the largest Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the 'National Volunteer Corps'), whose 'family' of front organizations is collectively called the 'Sangh Parivar'. The first event was an attack on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi in December 2001, and its aftermath, including the trial of its alleged perpetrators. The second was the state-sponsored violence against Muslim citizens in the western state of Gujarat in March 2002. Understood in the context of the Indian media's response to the September 11 attacks, these events serve to illustrate the evolution of the discourses surrounding 'Islamic' terrorism in the unique post-colonial context of Indian nationalism and its relationship to the US 'war on terror'.

The idea of Indian nationalism as a double-headed discourse split between a secular liberalism and a supremacist Hindu majoritarianism has also been argued before. Thomas Hansen, for instance, characterises the latter as 'neither a "pathology", nor an antithesis of nationalism, but merely its dark underside that refuses to go away.' (Hansen 1999, 217) As Partha Chatterjee has argued, this split discourse is rooted not only in the orientalising discourses of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth century, as evident in the nationalist historiography and fiction of the period, but also in the ambiguous relationship with Hindu nationalism represented by Gandhian anti-colonialist discourses in the early twentieth century (Chatterjee 1986).

This contradiction deepened in the postcolonial Indian state after the end of the Nehru era in the 1960s. The emergence of an economic consensus around neoliberal 'reforms' in the 1980s also saw a shift towards the right in the ruling Congress Party and a consequent legitimization of the nascent demands of Hindutva organisations. Arvind Rajagopal has discussed the broadcast of the Hindu epic Ramayan as a television series in 1987-88 as a contributing factor to the consensual legitimization of the Babri Masjid issue (the Hindutva demand for the replacement of the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth century mosque in northern India, with a new temple to the god Ram) as a normative element of Indian political discourse. The

broadcast was part of the Congress' rightward tilt and its subsequent attempt to increase its electoral chances among conservative upper-caste Hindus, but in the end it was 'the BJP, hardly a significant electoral force when the serial began in January 1987, that seized the opportunity afforded by the serial, and thereafter established itself as a major national party...' (Rajagopal 2001, 73).

While the term 'terrorism' has been used to characterise Sikh militant nationalism in Indian Punjab, the identification of Muslims with terrorists emerged only in the context of the current violent phase of the conflict in Kashmir, which began in the early 1990s. The idea of Muslim terrorists enacting violence against the putative Hindu nation-state was a necessary construct for the emergence of the BJP's discourses around the need to protect the nation from Muslim enemies. This militaristic discourse also shaped the violent campaign against Indian Muslims and other religious minorities as the 'enemy within'.

Also in the same period, as Ashis Nandy and others have discussed at length (Nandy et al, 1995), the BJP-led Ram Janmabhumi (birthplace of Ram) movement reached a peak in terms of the violence it engineered in North India. It has been argued that the rise of this movement to demolish the Babri mosque was shaped by several concerns, including the need to accommodate the rising aspirations of upper-caste, middle class Hindus in North India who had been consolidated into the BJP's new vote-bank. This group was also alienated by the then Government's acceptance of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, which sought to reserve 27 percent of government jobs and educational opportunities for traditional excluded groups of lower-caste Hindus, euphemistically referred to as the 'backward classes'. Nandy has also classified this movement as the outcome of the alienation caused by a disruptive secular modernity rooted in colonialism, as the 'ideology' of Hindutva that is opposed to the 'faith' of Hinduism. This view of Hindutva belies the more complex relationships between these categories, and even calls them into question since the boundary that Nandy posits between 'faith' and 'ideology' is not always clearly drawn in the case of the Hindutva movement. This distinction also enables an essentialist reading such as Nandy's to draw on Gandhi as an epitome of Hinduism as faith, to be posited against the violent excesses of rioting and destruction that is seen as the work of Hindutva as an ideology. I would argue here that this fiction of faith versus ideology is one of the bases for the Indian state's illusory role as an impartial guardian, above religion and politics. It functions in ways similar to what Mamdani calls the American 'culture talk' of the 'good Muslim, bad Muslim' which masks the Christian fundamentalist thrust of current American imperialist aggression in West Asia.

The entry of M.K. Gandhi into the Indian nationalist movement in the 1920s can be understood as the beginning of this consensus within Indian nationalism.

Although, as Chatterjee has shown, the movement for independence from British colonialism and the movement for a majoritarian Hindu nationalism have been intertwined in several ways even earlier, especially in colonial Bengal (Chatterjee 1986). However, Gandhi's use of popular Hinduism as part of the discourse of the Congress is seen as marking the beginning of a discourse that continues as India's official nationalism to this day. Contrary to the assumption that this discourse marginalized elitist Hindu nationalism through the mass politicisation of rural India, it can be argued that what occurred was a process of normalisation of Hindu nationalist discourse through their incorporation into the populist religious idiom of Gandhi's Congress. A detailed critique of this rhetoric is not possible here, but the fact that the Congress leadership was largely drawn from upper-caste, elite Hindus and was also funded by wealthy members of the mainly Hindu bourgeoisie serves to illustrate its core constituency and the Nehruvian nationalism of its postcolonial leadership role.

The official discourse of Indian nationalism formed during the Nehru years of the 1950s draws on two contradictory traditions. On the one hand, the idea of a third-World internationalism that was enabled through the decolonisation of much of Asia and Africa after World War II, and that was shaped by the peculiar exigencies of the Cold War environment; and on the other hand an ostensibly secular nation state that was nevertheless coded as Hindu, and was shaped as much by the normalized religious rhetoric of Gandhian nationalism as by the aftermath of the Partition that created the state of Pakistan as a homeland for south Asian Muslims, thus further normalising the 'Hindu-ness' of the post-Partition Indian state.

In this sense, secular Indian nationalism, commonly identified with Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress party, can be understood as a contradictory two-faced phenomenon, whose contradictions operate at different registers. As the official ideology of the postcolonial state, it reflects a liberal nationalism that emphasises a secular 'developmentalist' and statist approach. At the same time it also exhibits a normalisation of Hinduism within a secular state.

These contradictions intersect and become apparent in the relationship of the Indian state towards its Muslim citizens. This intersection is attenuated when this relationship is seen in the context of an imperialist war directed at Muslim states in west Asia that also has similar anti-Muslim overtones. The twin discourses of American imperialist nationalism and the construction of the Muslim terrorist when compared with Indian post-colonial nationalism and the demonisation of its Muslim other brings out aspects of the latter that cannot otherwise be so clearly understood. The incidents under consideration in this article are thus emblematic of this relationship.

### **The English-language Press: An Ambiguous Nationalism**

The interpretation of these events varies widely across the different forms of mass media in India. My focus on the responses of the English language press in particular is primarily because of its location on the fault line of this split in nationalist discourse in India, between a secular liberal political stance and a majoritarian cultural logic. The diversity of Indian mass media institutions and products with their complex interconnections with linguistic, regional, caste and economic compulsions makes the impossibility of any broad objective analysis obvious. The peculiarity of an English language press however, lies in its unique relationship to the both the politics of liberal secularism and to discourses of nationalism, and also in its claims to represent a national consensus, its self-defined 'right to define the nation' (Rajagopal 2001, 158). Most early English-language newspapers were founded by British entrepreneurs for a largely British-Indian readership and were resolutely opposed to the nationalist movement through the nineteenth century. Some newspapers, notably the *Hindu*, the *Indian Express* and the *Hindustan Times* began as responses to the colonial press by the English-speaking liberal Indian nationalist elite. All English language newspapers today are owned by large profit-making business houses and based in metropolitan centres. Some, like the *Times of India*, and the three publications mentioned above, have a nationwide circulation with multiple urban editions.

In terms of circulation and readership, English newspapers in India share the demographic peculiarities of the English language, spoken by less than 3 per cent of Indians although a prominent and significant part of the Indian public sphere and public space. This readership, like English speakers also tends to belong to an urban middle class and to urban elites. As Robin Jeffreys has shown, Indian language newspapers in India have a different history, economy and conditions of existence from the English language press (Jeffreys 2000), and they also have a different relationship to the discourses of Indian nationalism. While Indian language newspapers do not always participate in the Nehruvian secular-liberal consensus, they tend to be strongly nationalist in other ways. Jeffreys argues that this nationalism has more to do with the larger stake that Indian language newspapers have in domestic capitalism and in the national bourgeoisie (Ibid, 217-218), but it can also be understood as a result of the caste and class composition of their publics. Also as Rajagopal points out, Indian languages occupy very different loci in comparison both to English and to each other (Rajagopal 2001, 158-160), but taken together, they consciously define themselves as the languages of specific regional groups. An Indian language, as opposed to English is thus intimately tied to other issues in the evolution of a particular language community (inflected by caste, class and religion), both as a community in itself, and as a community in relation to others within the Indian nation.

Muslims (as Amrit Rai has painstakingly traced) are the most significant instance of such a location (Rai, 1984), but other instances such as the role of the Gurmukhi script in defining Sikhism in Indian Punjab as a coherent entity, the Shiv Sena's use of Marathi in constructing an exclusionary nativism in Mumbai (Jeffreys, 2000) are more contemporary yet equally important reminders of this process.

Arvind Rajagopal also argues that the English press represents the interests of Indian ruling elites, as a carryover of its role during the colonial period, when it represented the voice of rationality and order. Its dominance at the level of national politics rather than at the local also reflects the perceived neutrality of the English language and its identification with a pan-Indian elite, in contrast to the limited reach and representational claims of a regional language such as Hindi. This identification of the English language press with the Indian nation rather than with a language-community allows it a claim on the Nehruvian discourses of modernity and secularism (Ibid, 156-171). By and large the English-language press falls within a liberal-nationalist ideological framework, while a few publications (notably the Pioneer daily and the magazine *India Today*) articulate right-wing views. As a result, the majority of newspapers have tended to be critical of the BJP and its affiliates, while stopping short of any harsh scrutiny of either Indian military actions in Kashmir and elsewhere, or of the state's suppression of civil liberties.

The English press in India is thus uniquely situated for the purpose of my arguments: it occupies a location at the centre of the contradictions of Indian nationalism, in ways that Indian language publications and other media cannot. Despite the actual insignificance of English as a spoken language in India, its role in defining and shaping the Indian public as a national entity places the English press at the conflicted intersection of a liberal nationalism and of a normalised Hindu majoritarianism. Any understanding of religious nationalism and its relationship to postcolonial secularism in India has to begin at this intersection.

These contradictions become most apparent in situations of religious conflict, where the English press took unequivocal stands against the Hindutva represented by the RSS, the BJP and their affiliates and in situations of external conflict, especially with Pakistan when the same press falls in with the ostensibly secular nationalist consensus of preserving national security when threatened with a Muslim enemy. However, in the new context that we find ourselves today, and which I discuss below, these contradictions are further attenuated. This is the context of a resurgent American imperialism based on a Christian fundamentalist doctrine that defines the predominantly Muslim countries of West Asia (and Islam itself) as the enemy while simultaneously justifying itself as a secular and self-defensive American nationalism. Against this political background, the development of closer relations between the Indian state and the U.S because of the neo-liberal consensus of economic restructuring and also because of the BJP's

identification with the United States as an ally against a common Islamic enemy during its period in government (1999-2004), brings out further the remarkable conjunction of political narratives based among other things on a common antipathy to 'Islamic terrorism' that is couched in the language of a secular nationalism.

Apart from these broad shared assumptions, the two narratives also share a subtler similarity in their relationship with, and support for, the State of Israel. Although discourses of terrorism are culminations of two very different trajectories in the United States and India, both narratives dovetail neatly into a demonisation of Islam and Muslims. Older discourses of the Muslim or Arab Other in the United States merge with the American government's support for the State of Israel, to emerge in the post 9-11 scenario as a universalizing essentialist narrative of a medievalist Islam. Mamdani writes, "The scale of Israeli atrocities – "our terror" – has ballooned since 9/11. It has been packaged in the American media as an inevitable response "to their terror" and has shown the way for the Bush Administration's "war on terror" '(Ibid, 247). Israel has also become a touchstone in current Indian discourses of terrorism, where India's traditional support of the Palestinian cause was reversed, and the Hindutva vision of India as a modern non-Muslim homogenous nation-state fighting 'Islamic' terrorists took the Zionist underpinning of Israel as its model. In this Manichaean discursive shift, the Pakistani state and Kashmiri separatists stand in both for Palestine and for the US' own 'axis of evil' in acting as a metaphor for Islamic terrorism that would justify the Indian state's attacks on its Muslim citizens and its identification with the United States and Israel.

#### **Postcolonial Nationalism and Neo-colonial Wars**

One of the most significant analyses of the American discourse around the 'war on terror' has been Mahmood Mamdani's study of the neo-orientalist 'culture talk' in the United States. Mamdani argues that the Bush administration's conflation of Islam with terrorism singles out 'bad Muslims' as those responsible for terrorism, while acknowledging 'good Muslims' who are seen as '...anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support 'us' in a war against 'them.' (Mamdani 2004, 15)

Mamdani traces American religious fundamentalism, as represented by Evangelical churches to the 1920s American protestant political movements, which have achieved their highest form of political representation in the presidency of George W. Bush (Ibid, 38-44). In their fabrication of historical fact, the essentialism of their perspectives and the certainty of their faith, they roughly mirror the rise and fall of the RSS in the first half of the twentieth century, before their own takeover

of the Indian state beginning in the late 1980s and culminating in the tragedy of the Gujarat massacres. The political movement of Hindutva created by the RSS and its affiliates owes a great deal to the violent and exclusionary cultural nationalisms of the early twentieth century, rather than to religious fundamentals. The BJP's triumph in the closing years of the last century can thus be understood as the fruition of a modernist project of ultra-nationalism. Its similarities with fundamentalist Christianity lie in the necessity of the demonisation of Islam and the othering of Muslims as an essential characteristic of its self-definition.

The initial news coverage in India of the September 11 attacks highlighted both offers of help from the Indian government and also the first comparisons between India and the United States in terms of being targets for Islamic terrorism; especially between the attacks in New York and Washington and the ongoing conflict in Kashmir and earlier terrorist incidents in Mumbai and Delhi. The equation between the attacks and the Kashmir conflict frequently took the form of ideological parallels between Al-Qaeda's alleged role in the September 11 incidents and Pakistan's 'sponsorship' of militant groups in Kashmir. Since the September 11 attacks were so drastically novel in terms of a mediated spectacle, and so tragically enormous in terms of their immediate consequences, no parallel or comparison could be drawn in terms of the acts themselves. The equations that were made therefore had to be those of ideology and political classification. The ideology was already at hand in the form of 'Islamic' fundamentalism, and the political classification of 'terrorism' was also in currency as a name to identify Kashmiri separatists in mediated imaginings of the conflict in Kashmir. George W. Bush's much quoted 'either...with us or with the terrorists' speech also made the elision in India much easier.

However, the US government's subsequent alliance with Pakistan led to a change in the tenor of the coverage. This alliance also gave the Indian media more room to criticize the American military intervention not only in terms of its almost normative belligerence towards the Pakistani military, but also from the perspective of a Third World critique of American imperialism (Chakravarty 2002). This dual location enabled criticism of the invasion of Afghanistan from both sides of the Indian political spectrum.

The Indian media's reactions to the September 11 attacks can be understood on two different but related planes: first, as part of the nationalist-patriotic project of the mainstream (Hindu) Indian state, the media opposed the United States allying itself with its other, Islamic Pakistan; and secondly, representing its elite secular-liberal constituency, the media also articulated a postcolonial, formerly non-aligned nation's opposition to US hegemony and the demonisation of Islam. In practice however, the distinction between these two levels was not as clear, and is a reflection of the intertwined nature of a majoritarian Hindu nationalism and liberal



secularism in India. The two significant events that I discuss below are the most emblematic of this ambiguity inherent in Indian nationalism. The first is an attack on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi, and the subsequent arrest and prosecution of four Muslim citizens accused of being its instigators.

### **The Parliament Attack and Hindutva Propaganda: The Terrorist as 'Bad Muslim'**

Soon after the attacks in New York and Washington, on December 13<sup>th</sup> 2001, a group of militants drove into the heavily guarded Indian Parliament complex with the alleged intention of blowing up the building. The resulting shootout left all the militants and six security personnel dead. This incident was instantly compared to the 9/11 attacks, in intent and ideological context, if not in political magnitude or effect. A high-profile target – the very 'symbol of Indian nationhood' was the phrase in several newspapers and in the *Union* cabinet's resolution on the attack (Khare 2001) – and a group of 'fidayeen' or suicide bombers intent on crashing an explosive-laden vehicle into a crowded building were all elements that were common to both instances. The looming context of Islam as a terrorist ideology was also the unsaid common thread that ran through both instances.

December 13<sup>th</sup> also saw the emergence of a common nationalist viewpoint against the terrorist attack. All the parties in the parliamentary opposition, from the centrist Congress to the two main Communist parties, viewed the incident merely in terms of a security failure, criticizing the Government for not having done enough by way of protecting the Parliament building. They also echoed the Government's rhetoric about the attack on India's nationhood and democracy. While they might have differing viewpoints on the issue of attacking Pakistan, as *Outlook* noted editorially, '(e)verybody – both the ruling alliance and the Opposition parties – are unanimous in their tough-talking against those responsible for the dastardly attack on India's Parliament' ('Attack on Parliament' 2001).

The media responses to the December 13 incident are thus significant in two senses: they illustrate the attempt to reproduce the quality of the American characterisation of such events as 'Islamic terror' in an attempt to legitimise its nationalist interpretation, and – more significantly – they also illustrate the media's normalisation of Hindutva rhetoric of the Muslims as the 'enemy within'. This latter perspective is evident from an examination of the media's coverage of the trial and victimisation of Syed Abdur Rehman Geelani and his 'accomplices' accused of masterminding the attack.

Geelani, a Kashmiri Muslim lecturer in the University of Delhi, and three other Muslims were arrested and charged with treason and conspiracy barely two days after the incident. On the night of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> December, Geelani was arrested by the Delhi police on the basis of an intercepted two-minute telephone conversation with his stepbrother in Srinagar. The other three 'accomplices' were Mohammed Afzal, the alleged coordinator of a Kashmiri separatist organization and Shaukat Husain Guru, a fruit merchant who were both arrested in Srinagar; and Shaukat Husain's wife Afsan Guru, arrested from her apartment in Delhi.

The English-language media's response to this near-instantaneous resolution was, with few exceptions, celebratory and full of praise for the investigating agencies. Mohammad Afzal's alleged links to the Pakistani intelligence agency and the Kashmiri ethnicity of the accused seemed to provide irrefutable proof of their guilt. The fact that Afzal, a former militant with the separatist Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front had subsequently surrendered to Indian security forces in 1993 was never mentioned, nor were the actual contents of the incriminating telephone conversation, which apart from Afzal's 'confession', was the only material evidence in the case. The case against the S.A.R. Geelani wove its way through a Special Court, where he was pronounced guilty and sentenced to death, to the Delhi High Court where he was acquitted, and finally in the Indian Supreme Court, where the acquittal was upheld, although with a strange rejoinder by the presiding judge that he was not entirely convinced of Geelani's innocence. As things stand, Geelani and Afsan Guru have been acquitted, Shaukat Husain sentenced to life in prison and Mohammed Afzal awaits his death sentence.

While the language and tenor of the reportage has been discussed exhaustively elsewhere (Haksar 2004), I am concerned here with their place in the discursive continuum of the process of constructing an 'Islamic' enemy. The news reports were either fabrications and misrepresentations of facts, or verbatim repetitions of the police versions of the case. The editorials and op-ed commentaries followed this pattern, with even secular liberal commentators echoing nationalist arguments for attacking Pakistan or ensuring punishment for the 'accused'. The undercurrent of the Muslim other, while never overtly acknowledged, was obvious through the reports. From the reporters' assumptions about the motives of the 'accused', to a television reconstruction of the police version of the incident broadcast on the satellite channel Zee TV, to the judges' own statements about what they thought of the accused, the entire tragedy played out against the BJP and the RSS' increasingly shrill and violent rhetoric against the Muslim enemy within and without. The Kashmiri origins of all of the accused served to only emphasize this undercurrent, since the population of the Kashmir valley was already alienated from the Indian mainstream, and its separatist movement – and the conflict between India and Pakistan over its territory – was one of the main justificatory arguments for the RSS' campaign against Muslims in the rest of India.

In a related incident, a Jordanian doctoral student in Astrophysics in Delhi University, Qays Abd-al Kareem, was also targeted as being the 'disciple' of the 'terrorist don' Geelani (Sharma 2001). Geelani had introduced Qays to the People's Union for Civil Liberties since the student had been continually harassed by fundamentalist Hindu groups on the campus. Qays was illegally detained by the police, further harassed by the University authorities and then inexplicably 'deported' (Wahi 2005, 123-128). But the episode gave enough material for headlines about the hitherto missing 'Middle East' angle to Geelani's story. The five men who actually attacked the parliament complex, and who were all killed, were referred to as the 'fedayeen' with a constant repetition of the fact that one of them had earlier been involved in the 1999 hijacking of an Indian domestic airliner (IC-814) by the Taliban in Afghanistan. This was also a statement with no material evidence, yet was never retracted or clarified. Along with the reference to Qays Abd-al Kareem, this 'Afghan angle' seemed essential in order to associate the Parliament attack with transnational Islam, and with Afghanistan and West Asia, especially in the backdrop of the American invasion of Afghanistan two months earlier.

In retrospect, the fabrication and overt police censorship that characterized the media's construction of the entire 'Geelani case' seems a desperate attempt to achieve a respectability of sorts for the Parliament attack by equating it with the September 11 attacks. This was also apparent from the very first reactions by the Indian government to the incident, when the home minister L.K. Advani said, 'Had the terrorists managed to enter Parliament House, the magnitude of the devastation would have eclipsed the September 11<sup>th</sup> incidents' (Pioneer New Service 2001), before immediately going on to compare the attack with the 1999 hijacking incident. *The Hindu* on December 16<sup>th</sup> also reported the Indian Prime Minister's remarks on religious fanaticism: 'we saw it on September 11<sup>th</sup> and we have seen it again on December 13<sup>th</sup>. (Bhattacharya 2001)'

The anti-Muslim tenor of the Government's statements after the Parliament attacks and during the Geelani case is clear enough, yet the otherwise secular English-language press simply echoed the Government's line on the event and the investigation. This was similar to the behaviour of the press in similar situations concerning 'national security' and the armed forces: the Kargil conflict of 1999 (Chatterji 2004), bomb blasts in Srinagar, Kashmir earlier in 2001, an attack on a temple in Gandhinagar, Gujarat in September 2002 and a police shootout in a Delhi shopping mall in November 2002. In all these cases (the first a major armed conflict between the Indian Army and Pakistani 'infiltrators'; and the others incidents that occurred in densely populated areas) the English language press was content to toe the Government line, raising doubts only when human rights

advocates or alert activist judges did so. This disconnect, between Hindu nationalism framed as patriotism and Hindu nationalism framed as religious hatred, is all the more surprising when we consider the increasing Hindu-isation of the Indian nation-state since the recent rise to political power of the BJP.

This disconnect can also be theorized, as Mamdani does, in terms of the 'culture talk' of Nehruvian secular nationalism: the Indian media recognizes a distinction between 'our' Muslims in India and 'their' Muslims in Pakistan<sup>3</sup>. While the same undercurrent of Hindu nationalist ideology is responsible for the construction of both these 'enemies' as the Other of mainstream Hindu India, this process of othering the Muslims takes place at different registers: the 'enemy within' of the RSS is an othering that occurs at the level of Indian political discourse and is part of what is understood and defined as 'Hindu communalism', while the demonising of the Pakistani Muslim 'terrorist' is a process rooted deeply within a secular postcolonial nationalism. Mamdani writes of a similar split in the US government's rhetoric on Islam and Muslims following September 11:

...President Bush moved to distinguish between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims'. From this point of view, 'bad Muslims' were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the President seemed to assure Americans that 'good Muslims' were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support 'us' in a war against 'them.' (Mamdani 2004, 15)

In the discourses of liberal Indian secularism, therefore, this disconnect arises between the 'good Muslim' other who is the victim of Hindu communalism, and the 'bad Muslim' who is the Pakistani terrorist 'infiltrating' Indian territory to attack (Hindu) temples, shopping malls and government buildings. This split understanding of the Muslim other explains the depth, accuracy and perseverance that characterized much of the English-language media's coverage of the second significant event that I consider here: the genocidal violence in the state of Gujarat in early 2002.

### **Defending Secularism in Gujarat: The Riot Victim as 'Good Muslim'**

At the end of February 2002, in an environment of intense polarisation between Hindus and Muslims in northern India, a train carrying Hindu nationalist volunteers from Ayodhya was stopped outside Godhra station in Gujarat. One of the coaches was set on fire, killing 57 passengers on board. While the circumstances surrounding this incident are still unclear and the official explanation ultimately tended toward the conclusion that the fire was set inside the coach, and seemed more accident than arson, the immediate explanation given was that the coach had been burned by Muslims in Godhra in revenge for the

'pilgrims' recent kar seva ('service through work', a euphemism for volunteer activism with the Sangh's front organisations) in Ayodhya.

Immediately after this incident the VHP and other Sangh organisations began a campaign mobilizing Hindutva activists and sympathisers across the state of Gujarat to 'avenge' 'Godhra'. Gujarat was at this time ruled by the BJP leader, Narendra Modi, one of the staunchest ideologues of a hard-line Hindutva strategy. The RSS campaign against Muslims was incorporated into the state's official discourse, with Modi himself responsible for some of the most vitriolic speeches. Many of his speeches from this period harp on the foreignness of the Muslim in India and are replete with references to 'Mian Musharraf', a perjorative reference to the Pakistani president as the ostensible leader of Indian Muslims. The process of othering the Muslim citizen was also accomplished by a constant public repetition of derogatory stereotypes and by mocking Muslim religious practices<sup>4</sup>.

Terrorised by cadres of the RSS and its organizations, Gujarat's Muslim population was forced to either migrate to other states, or find a place in one of the Muslim refugee camps in the city of Ahmedabad. Faced with little resistance, most of the RSS cadres were supplied with detailed census data and municipal records of Muslim homes and businesses. They were also protected in most cases by local police as they went about their massacre and looting (Desai and Ray 2002).

Barring a couple of right-wing publications, the vast majority of the English language press ran stories and editorials sharply critical of the Sangh organisations and of the complicity of the Gujarat administration in the violence (Varadarajan 2003). The media's rigorous investigation of the Hindu Right's hate speech and the Gujarat government's systematic killing of Muslim citizens demonstrated an almost heroic defence of civil liberties and secular values. A large part of public anger against the BJP was shaped by the press coverage of the violence and its long-term effect on Gujarat's Muslims. Reports from refugee camps and interviews with victims formed the most significant portion of this reportage, in stark contrast to the usual treatment of Muslims as faceless terrorists. This contrast is shaped by both the 'culture talk' of 'good Muslim, bad Muslim' (Mamdani 2004, 20-22) and also by the related split in the nationalism of the English language press, which itself is emblematic of the larger contradictions within Indian nationalism in general.

### **Conclusion: A Double-headed Nationalism**

Operating on the ambiguous terrain of Nehruvian secular nationalism, the Indian English press falls into the trap of defining 'our' Muslims in opposition to 'their' Muslims. While the victimhood of 'our' Muslims in Gujarat was considered worthy

of championing by a free and privately controlled press, the 'terrorism' represented by 'their Muslims' in Pakistan called forth only the uncritical repetition of state propaganda and a celebration of state repression. Conversely, the Sangh Parivar's brutal massacres in Gujarat in the aftermath of the Godhra incident was perceived as the result of a hate campaign by a violent fascist organisation, but the same campaign in the form of the state's prosecution of Syed Abdur Rehman Geelani, and similar victimisation of Muslim citizens in the stated context of 'national security' was seen as a Third World nation-state's legitimate actions of self-defence. Similarly, the support extended to the United States' initial threat of war against Muslim populations was later qualified when it became apparent that it did not serve the interests of 'national security' in relation to Pakistan.

The blind spot of 'national security' suppressed any commitment to truth seeking and truth-telling that the press might have espoused. The connections between a Hindu nationalist government's attacks on the rights and freedoms of Muslims in the name of fighting terrorism and the same government's genocidal killing of Muslims in the name of a Hindu nationhood were not drawn. The American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq acted as a legitimising discourse in reference to the conflict in Kashmir or the intensification of violent campaigns against Muslims.

The English-language media's contradictory responses to the Parliament attack trial and the genocidal violence in Gujarat can now be seen as the effect of its location within the Nehruvian framework of a post-colonial secular-nationalist ideology. Rather than being seen as inconsistent, they have to be understood within the continuum of the media's relationship to the Indian nation-state.

Mamdani's argument around the construction of the 'good Muslim, bad Muslim' dichotomy also found its place in the mainstream English press. Like its American counterpart, this binary shaped its reportage of the 'good' Muslim as a victim of Hindu nationalist violence, and the 'bad' Muslim as a Pakistan-inspired terrorist. Conversely, Hindu nationalism itself performed a paradoxical dual role in this contradiction: against the Muslim as terrorist, Hindutva was characterised as the manifest expression of a 'secular' Indian nationalism; and when faced with the Muslim victim, Hindu nationalism turned into 'communalism', the antithesis of the secular Nehruvian state. As a 'good Hindu, bad Hindu' narrative, it played a necessary foil to Mamdani's description of the dual characterisation of Islam.

The same binary is also narrativised in essentialist terms of an Eastern 'faith' versus a Western 'ideology'. Nandy's split between Hinduism as home-grown Indian faith (the 'good Hindu') and Hinduism as an imported colonial ideology (the 'bad Hindu') is one instance of this (Nandy 2002, 62), which is inspired by Gandhi's own conflation of a normative upper-caste Hinduism with Indian nationalism.

However, again like its American counterpart, this rhetoric only serves to mask the violence of Hindutva by displacing it into a generalised violence of European colonialism, in ways similar to the American displacement of its own religious imperialism into a secularised conflict with 'terror'. These displacements go some way in enabling us to understand the conflicted rhetoric of secular nationalism that I have discussed.

The coverage of the Parliament attack case and the violence in Gujarat illustrates this contradictory nationalism of the English-language press. The Parliament attack and other incidents involving 'terrorism' called forth the nationalist-patriotic sentiment of the media, and this nationalism was, consciously or unconsciously, coded as Hindu, just as the 'terrorism' was always coded as Muslim. The genocide in Gujarat, on the other hand, brought out the secular-liberal traditions of the same media institutions where they vigorously defended the secular Nehruvian institutional and ideological framework from the onslaught of its Hindu nationalist variant. However the duplicity of their contradictory roles went unacknowledged. Within the framework of liberal Indian nationalism, the press still posited a clear opposition between 'communalism' and 'secularism', but in their discursive practice of reporting this opposition, that liberal nationalist framework was inadvertently and inevitably coded as Hindu.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article were incorporated into an essay titled 'Media, Terror and Islam' co-authored with Paula Chakravartty on comparisons between Hindutva and the American 'war on terror' [forthcoming in Basu, A. and S. Roy (eds.) *Violence and Democracy in India*, Oxford: Berg Publishers]. In this article I draw on those same comparisons to discuss the inherent religious contradictions within an ostensibly secular postcolonial nationalism as it is mediated by the English language press in India. I am grateful to Prof. Chakravartty for her suggestions and comments.

<sup>2</sup> The history and recent rise of the RSS as an Indian political phenomenon has been painstakingly traced in several excellent works, both popular and academic. These include Christophe Jaffrelot's exhaustive *Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, A.G. Noorani's *RSS and the BJP: A Division of Labour*, Thomas Blom Hansen's *The Saffron Wave* and Tapan Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence. Culture talk after 9/11, for example, qualified and explained the practice of "terrorism" as "Islamic."'

"Islamic terrorism" is thus offered as both description and explanation of the events of 9/11'. (Mamdani 2004, 17-18)

<sup>4</sup> Rakesh Sharma's independent documentary film on the Gujarat massacres, *Final Solution* has extensive footage of the campaign speeches by Narendra Modi and other BJP and VHP activists. The film was banned in India for several months until the BJP's defeat in the October 2004 general election.

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