

The high price of 'politics as usual': Signs of social crisis erupt in India

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

Since the beginning of the year, one controversy after another has dominated the political arena in India. Opposition leaders, with little credibility and even less grassroots support, floated scheme after scheme to pressure the government, and rumors of drastic political upheavals were the order of the day. The important February-May "budget session" of Parliament, like the administration itself, was virtually paralyzed by the relentless swirl of scandals.

Though on one level the drama has its own logic and implications, there is little doubt that the greatest impact has been to systematically divert the attention of the government, the Parliament, and the country from the real issues and problems confronting the nation. The price is apparent in the recent eruption of communal carnage on an unprecedented scale in north India (see *EIR*, Vol. 14 No. 25, June 19, 1987), the renewal of terrorism and separatist agitation in Punjab and the Northeast, and the steady intrusion of the drug menace India.

There have been more incidents of communal violence in the first half of 1987 than in all of 1986. The elected government of Punjab was removed and President's Rule imposed once again, while the Ghorkhaland movement threatens to resort to arms in West Bengal, dragging Sikkim into the tangle to boot. Continuing massive seizures of heroin reflect the hold Dope, Inc. is gaining. The price has been paid in a different way in the state of Haryana, where the ruling Congress (I) was decisively routed in the important June 17 state assembly elections.

Underneath is a failure of leadership. The constructive economic-programmatic plans of the Rajiv Gandhi government, the focus of so much of India's hopes for the future, have been buried. Though it was necessary to politicize this thrust, since a breakthrough economically is a key to many of the less tractable social issues, Rajiv Gandhi deferred. The communal and other underlying points of potential upheaval were similarly ignored, or dealt with bureaucratically. The prime minister's vaunted pragmatism allowed him to be boxed into a fire-fighting mode that gives him no chance of mastering the country's real problems, even if he wants to.

Slowly but surely, amidst the Delhi fireworks of the last six months "politics as usual" has won the day, and in the context of the byzantine political process that prevails in India it is a prescription for disaster.

It has been mostly impossible to discern behind the stage-actors just who was doing what to whom at any given time. The essential dynamics of the show have a strong root in factional battles within the ruling Congress (I) itself, with political power plays centering on Rajiv Gandhi's ability to consolidate control over a party hobbled by corruption and competing fiefdoms. At the centenary of the Congress Party in December 1985 Gandhi had thrown down the gauntlet to the barons and powerbrokers, vowing to break their hold over the party machinery and breathe fresh life into the limping hulk of what once led the freedom struggle.

Panicked, powerbrokers of greater and lesser stripe rushed into battle, picking up any potential weapon at hand. The opposition salivated. It was a seller's market for the masters of intrigue, domestic and foreign alike. Hence the series of scandals, both real and imagined, which broke first with leaks of Finance Ministry investigations under way into illegal foreign exchange dealing and the simultaneous eruption into public view of President Giani Zail Singh's gripes against the prime minister. A bid by an ambitious but frustrated Zail Singh to dismiss the government has been the persisting operative fantasy of the opposition and its fellow schemers.

In rapid-fire succession came:

- The "Fairfax affair," the scandal surrounding Finance Ministry retention of the Virginia-based company, The Fairfax Group, headed by former AID official and Watergate investigator Michael Herschman, to investigate illegal economic activity by certain Indian individuals and companies;

- Revelations of kickbacks on a West German submarine deal, and Defense Minister V.P. Singh's departure from the cabinet (hounded out by Congress men who charged he was party to a foreign-authored destabilization of the government;

- The "Bofors scandal," surfaced and insistently kept on center stage by the pro-disarmament Swedish Radio, who charged that the arms deal of the century, a \$4 billion sale of 155 mm howitzers to India, channeled some \$50 million in kickbacks into secret Swiss accounts of top government and Congress Party officials.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his government were thrown onto the defensive. Before they could respond to one scandalous charge, another would pop up. The government was inexplicably silent or evasive, which only helped to fuel

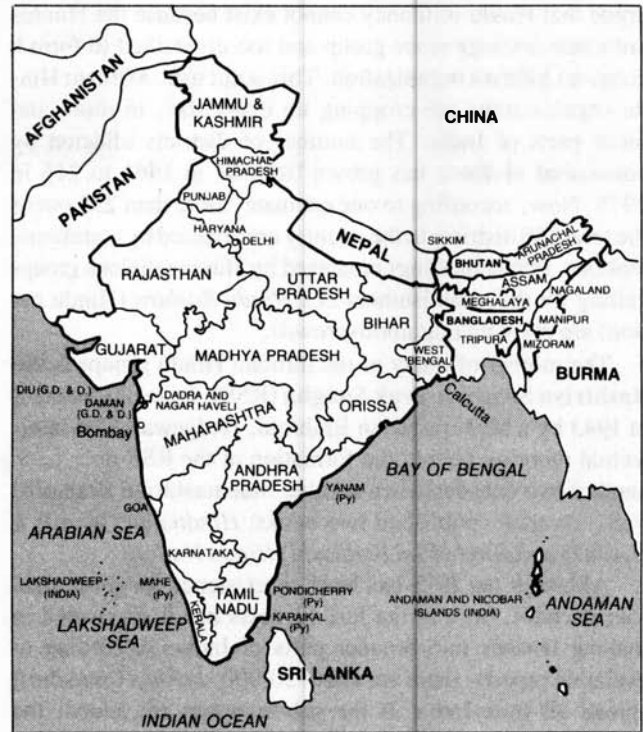
the chaos. Brawls between Congress members broke out, featuring scathing attacks by party members on colleagues in the cabinet, notably V.P. Singh. Congress reverses in three important state elections during March—in spite of Rajiv Gandhi's personal campaigning—contributed to the disintegration.

Now, six months and a Congress Party mobilization against the “foreign hand” later, much of the dust has settled. Of the scandals, the menacing potential of Bofors is still intact. Having at first denied the existence of any commissions in the deal, the government has now called for a parliamentary inquiry into the affair and promised swift punishment to any and all culprits, regardless of their position or influence. The Swedish government officially confirmed the existence of substantial “winding up” payments in connection with the gun deal, but claimed that Bofors withheld pertinent details as to the recipients' identities. As far as Fairfax is concerned, the government officially terminated the relationship it first maintained didn't exist, and the matter is all but forgotten. A judicial inquiry into the propriety of having hired Fairfax is under way. Another closed-door investigation is under way in the Defense Ministry on the West German submarine deal.

Though Rajiv Gandhi has given convincing evidence of having bent over backwards to accommodate the petulant party barons and their diverse lobbies, the Haryana elections confirm the party's continued infirmity. From the standpoint of India's welfare and progress, what stands out is the failure of leadership at a time when an accumulation of old problems—religious fundamentalism and regionalism—and of newer ones, like terrorism and drug trafficking, threaten to shatter the world's largest democracy. These problems are intimately related to the snail's-pace economic growth and cycle of waste and corruption that have yet to be broken. (See *EIR*, Vol. 14, No. 20, May 15, 1987.)

Fundamentalism on the rise

During the last decade, religious movements in India have taken a more militant shape. With the partition of Pakistan from India following British-orchestrated bloodbaths between the Hindus and Muslims, formation of an Islamic Republic in Pakistan created a source of potential hostility between the two major religious groups in India—the Hindu majority and the 120-million-strong Muslim minority. The Punjab problem, which began with economic demands and greater autonomy by the Sikh population who marginally dominated the state, threw up obscurantist leaders such as Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. From that point onward, Punjab's demand turned into *Sikh demands*, and confrontation became the mode of expression. Over the last four years, this confrontational posture has given rise to secessionism, martyrdom for the Sikhs, and an escalating series of irrational demands.



While the Sikhs in Punjab had always associated Sikhism freely with politics, Hindus, in general, had not done likewise. Fragmented by its caste structure and pantheon full of gods and goddesses with varied importance in different parts of the country, Hinduism remained separated from political power. Hindus, at least many of them, were economically much better off than the Muslims or Sikhs. Many of the Sikhs were victims of the 1947 partition of India. Moreover, they are not traders by and large, and are mostly interested in agricultural and manufacturing activities. This left the Hindu *baniyas* (traders) free of competition, even in Punjab. There was no reason for the Hindus to be upset over the growing prosperity of the Sikhs, as they themselves enjoyed the riches created by the Sikh farmers and manufacturers.

Such, however, has not been the case where Hindus and Muslims live together, mostly in the Ganga basin area. In this area, Muslims tend to be artisans involved in handicrafts and cottage industries, working for Hindu entrepreneurs. In the post-partition days, and, in particular, in recent decades, the government's efforts to alleviate poverty among underprivileged groups raised the Muslims' economic power marginally—just enough to elevate the Muslim artisans to small manufacturers, hiring other Muslim artisans to do the job. This created a direct economic confrontation with the Hindu entrepreneurs which has been the cause of many of the recent riots in India. Facing economic competition, Hindus began to look to communal organizations for protection.

The rise of Hindu militants is a recent phenomenon. Many

Hindus would not admit even today that Hindu fundamentalism exists. Complex sociological analysis is often cited to argue that Hindu militancy cannot exist because the Hindus are a non-homogeneous group and too diversified to form a coherent militant organization. This is not true. Militant Hindu organizations are cropping up every day, in more and more parts of India. The number of districts affected by communal violence has grown from 61 in 1961 to 216 in 1979. Now, according to one estimate, more than 259 out of the total 350 districts in the country are affected by communal tensions. Public meetings organized by Hindu religious groups calling for the establishment of a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation) are drawing mammoth crowds.

The mother of many of the militant Hindu groups is the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha** (RSS), formally founded in 1943 by a Maharashtrian Brahmin, Hedgewar. The intellectual mooring behind the formation of the RSS goes back another two decades when another Maharashtrian Brahmin, V.S. Savarkar, published two books: *Hindutva (Who Is a Hindu?)* and *Hindu Pad Padasahi (Hindu Nation)*.

Although the RSS has been in existence for more than four decades, only in the last 10 years has it succeeded in making inroads into broader parts of India. According to available reports, there are about 20,000 *shakhas* (branches) spread all over India. If the sub-branches are added, the number would exceed 40,000. In Uttar Pradesh alone, the RSS has 5,000 branches, and in Delhi there are 50 large branches. RSS *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) are trained physically every day at these *shakhas*. According to one estimate, the RSS has more than 1 million such volunteers. Hard-core RSS members who work full-time for the organization would number 3,000. Besides Uttar Pradesh, the RSS has a strong presence in: Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Haryana. In Assam, the RSS is running main branches at 300 places scattered over the state, and has now decided to concentrate more in the northeastern states, particularly Nagaland.

From its inception, the RSS was a well-knit organization. Education, medical service, and developmental work have been the thrust areas. In electoral politics, the RSS's political arm was the Bharatiya Jan Sangh in 1950. "Jan Sangh" became a potent force in north India, but was contained mainly there. In 1977, in the wake of formation of the Janata Party which defeated Congress (I) and unseated Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Jan Sangh merged with the opposition. In 1980 it reemerged in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political front of the RSS.

Two catalytic events

Although the RSS has participated in the democratic process over the years, its main activity is to organize militant Hindus to demand *Hindu Rashtra*. Over the years, inept handling of political crises and conspicuous use of communal factions for electoral advantage have provided the RSS, as

well as various Muslim and Christian organizations, the opportunity to become active and vocal. In the recent period, two events in particular have added to the Hindu fundamentalists' strength and visibility.

The first is the ongoing turmoil in Punjab. Terrorists in Punjab, in their attempt to make it a communal issue, targeted the Hindus as well as the secular-minded Sikhs in the state. The reaction was predictable: Attacks against the Hindus were played up, and the RSS took the opportunity to organize the disgruntled Hindus as militias.

One of the RSS's mass organizing arms, the **Vishwa Hindu Parishad**, which was formed in 1964, became very active forming new militant fronts in the early 1980s. Front organizations such as Virat Hindu Samaj, Hindu Samajotsav, Bajrang Dal, Youth Volunteer Corps, Hindu Shiv Sena, Hindu Shiv Shakti Dal, and others have since been formed. The Hindu Shiv Sena in Punjab, now four years old, claims to have baptized more than 80,000. In Uttar Pradesh, in towns like Meerut, Khatauli, Sambhal, and Moradabad—the Muslim heartland of the state, and the scene of the recent bloody rioting—units of Akhil Bharatiya Shiv Shakti Dal have been formed. Activists wear saffron caps and sashes, and carry plastic-covered *trishuls*, or tridents, the symbol of Shiva's ruling power. The group claims more than 50,000 adherents.

Every morning in the older part of Delhi, according to press reports, these militants hold their parade and at the end of a ritualistic ceremony hand out tridents to the "baptized" ones. There have been reports that these tiny tridents have been used against local Sikhs and Muslims during the skirmishes between the religious groups which have continued intermittently, at the least provocation, since the bloody riots that followed Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in October 1984.

The second event which boosted the Hindu communalists' movement is the controversy over Ram Janabhoomi, or "Ram's Birthplace," in Ayodhya, near Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. According to some Hindus, Rama, the god-incarnate in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, was born in Ayodhya. Hindus have long been claiming that centuries back the Muslims created a mosque, the Babri Masjid, where the holy Rama was born. That mosque still exists and is in use. The controversy was taken to court for settlement in the late 1940s, when an idol of Lord Rama was discovered in an inner chamber of the building and Hindus demanded possession of that portion of the shrine. Precisely because of its inflammatory potential, the court shelved the issue, and that section of the building has been under government lock and key ever since. Suddenly, two years ago, a district judge in Uttar Pradesh decided to open the temple doors.

The decision created a mass upsurge of Hindu fundamentalists in the area and a great deal of animosity within the Muslim community. Fundamentalists from both camps added fuel to the fire, resulting in Hindu-Muslim riots in at least 45 towns in Uttar Pradesh—home for 25% of India's Muslim population. A Hindu "action committee" is demanding possession of the entire building. Recently, a meeting of 200,000

Drug plague out of control

In early May, according to press reports, the Narcotics Control Board—India's equivalent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration—launched an operation against illegal opium poppy cultivators in the hills of northwestern Uttar Pradesh state. Predictably the operation ran into some political trouble, but it was the first operation of its kind and marks the beginning of the end for the official myth that India has only a "transit" problem with drugs. India's location between the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent, with open international air facilities, made it an ideal choice for Dope, Inc. operations. But that was just the beginning, in 1982-83, of what has now become a major domestic problem with far-reaching and deadly consequences.

It was the British who established the legal opium production industry which the Indian government has maintained to this day. But the world market for medicinal opium products has sagged and the government is now saddled with several thousand tons of raw opium stockpiles just waiting to be leaked into the private market. Contract cultivation has become virtually impossible to control under conditions where traffickers offer as much as 10 times the government's price for opium. The fact that it is no longer a question of licensed cultivators siphoning off a little excess production, but rather the proliferation of wholly illegal poppy growing operations is itself an indicator of the strength of the market.

More than two years ago, police raids in both Bombay and the interior of the country, in Madhya Pradesh state, revealed that sophisticated heroin-refining operations were in place within the country. The free availability of the crucial chemicals and process skills for heroin refining would not have been overlooked by the astute managers of Dope, Inc. But what has convinced Indian officials that the drug problem is serious is the fact that addiction has burst out of the confines of jet-set recreation to involve broad layers of the population.

B.V. Kumar, director general of the NCB, estimates India's addict population at more than half a million. Unless the present trend is halted, it was pointed out at an anti-drug meeting in Punjab recently, that figure will reach 15 million by the turn of the century.

Despite a sweeping reform of the previously lax narcotics control legislation in 1985 and establishment of a

Narcotics Control Board to direct the national anti-drug effort, there has not yet been any comprehensive study of the extent of drug abuse in India. Several limited surveys conducted by the Ministry of Welfare, the Indian Council for Medical Research, and individual government hospitals and other institutions, give a glimpse of the parameters of the problem.

In 1982, for instance, the four government hospitals in New Delhi treated 50 drug addicts. Three years later, in 1985, that number had jumped 60 times, to 3,000! Similar reports have come from Bangalore and Madras in the south, and from Manipur, near the Burma border in the northeast. As is the case for narcotics seizures, addicts seeking treatment represent only a small percentage of the actual phenomenon.

Other studies indicate that the leap in addiction is concentrated among individuals in the 16-30 age group. One hospital study correlates this with the rise of heroin addiction cases from zero in 1980 to more than 70% of all narcotics cases in 1984. Studies of the university population in various cities have found drug use rates as high as 70% on some campuses.

But the most revealing picture of the scope of the problem comes from a study carried out by a government hospital in New Delhi. It found that 12% of the addicts had no income, 75% earned from Rs.200-1,000 per month, 7% earned Rs.1,000-2,000, and only 2% earned more than Rs.2,000—in other words, the broad middle and lower class is providing the bulk of the market, the bus drivers, the taxi drivers, truck drivers, lower-echelon government servants, soldiers, and so on.

If statistics for narcotics seizures are any indication, the deluge has just begun. In 1980 there was not a single case of dope-peddling registered. In 1983, there were 13 cases and 20 kg of narcotics were seized. In 1985, one thousand cases were registered and 250 kg seized. In the first 10 months of 1986 alone, an incredible 2,850 kg of heroin were seized from all parts of India—equivalent to more than half the annual U.S. addict consumption!

Moreover, the emergency efforts to contain the menace have been overrun already. The 1983 law is riddled with loopholes which have been taken advantage of routinely by traffickers. Political lobbies and bureaucratic turf fights have crippled the overall enforcement effort, already lacking in needed infrastructure. Treatment and rehabilitation facilities are virtually nonexistent: With an addict population estimated at 100,000-200,000, New Delhi has a grand total of exactly 53 hospital beds for drug patients.

was held in Ayodhya, presided over by Vijay Raje Scindia, a BJP leader and the queen-ruler of Gwalior, who called on Hindus to shed their last drop of blood to protect Lord Rama's birthplace.

The seeds of the erupting violence were laid by the Hindu militants. In 1984, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad launched a chariot: Inside the chariot was the idol of Rama in a padlocked cage. For almost three years now this chariot has been crisscrossing the nation, stoking the fires and enlisting fundamentalist cadres. VHF has also set up a **Dharmik Asthan Raksha** or Holy Place Protection Committee, which argues that Hindu holy places in Ayodhya, Mathura, and Varanasi, and more than 100 other places, should be liberated and given back to the Hindus. Most of these sites, not surprisingly, have mosques which are attended by a large number of Muslims. Although God is the rallying cry, Hindu fundamentalists do not leave all the action to God. Thousands of RSS volunteers wearing khaki shorts parade the streets of major towns.

Mullahs on the march

If Hindu fundamentalism has become a visible force in the last decade, the Muslims, who make up 20% of India's population of 800 million—a much larger Muslim population than that of most Islamic states—have always been largely in the control of fundamentalist elements. In 1947, when Pakistan was carved out of the subcontinent map, most of the leading Muslims with a mass base opted for Pakistan. Those who stayed behind were the “enlightened” ones, or, in other words, socialists who had opposed the formation of Pakistan and cast their lot with the ruling Congress Party. Although they were men of stature, they were also defeated: They had failed to out-duel the more chauvinist Muslims who claimed they needed a homeland since it would be dangerous for the Muslim community to be ruled by the Hindus. These “enlightened” Muslim leaders had less contact with the poor Muslims who still comprise the majority of the community, and were considered by the poor Muslims as affluent and “Hindu-ized.”

Thus, with partition, a void was created at the top of the Muslim community into which the *Hajis* and *Maulavis*—the religious leaders—promptly stepped. They were for the “protection” of the Muslims and Islam. The “enlightened” leaders remained useful politically as they continued to attract Muslim votes merely because they were Muslims. Even today every political party, Congress or Communist or the RSS-backed Hindu chauvinists, puts up Muslim candidates wherever Muslims are in the majority.

Muslim fundamentalism centers around the mosque and religious leaders. The Muslim fundamentalists were recently given a boost when the administration passed the Muslim Women's Bill. The bill was the result of a December 1985 Supreme Court decision granting maintenance to a Muslim woman, who had been divorced by her estranged husband after 43 years of marriage. The judgment, which cited the aim of a “uniform civil code” enshrined in the Indian consti-

tution, provoked demonstrations by the Muslim fundamentalists in various towns of India. The rallying cry was: “*Shariat bachas!*” (“Save the Islamic edicts!”). The judgment, the mullahs claimed, was against the *Shariat* and an infringement of Muslim personal law, and must be scrapped.

The elite Muslims, isolated from the slogan-chanting fundamentalists, supported the court judgment. But within two months, the administration introduced the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, 1986, negating the crux of that judgment. The bill proposed the maintenance of Muslim divorcees who are unable to maintain themselves by relatives, or the state Wakf Boards, the local Muslim social welfare agencies. After hectic politicking, the administration rammed the bill through the Parliament. Whether the bill will help the divorced Muslim women is a question. What is certain is that the Muslim fundamentalists wield a considerable amount of power, and the elite, progressive Muslims are a defeated lot. Since many Islamic nations have adopted laws in concert with the Indian Supreme Court judgment, the 1986 Bill was not so much a bending to Islamic precepts as a rank capitulation to local obscurantist Muslims out of political expediency.

Like the RSS among the Hindus, the **Jamaat-e-Islami** among the Muslims have various organizational arms. During the Hyderabad riots, *Majlis-e-Ittihad* Muslimin played a major role. In Maharashtra, a series of riots in Bhiwandi and Thane, the Ram Janambhoomi incident, and the Muslim Women Bill have given rise to hydra-headed monsters such as the *Tablioche-Zemat*, Indian Union Muslim League, Islamic Students Organization, *Thanz-e-Shariat*, *Rustom-e-Zemat*, *Tuvuk Mandal*, and others. In Kerala, where the Muslims and Hindus have lived peacefully for the last four decades, fundamentalists are now active. The Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) based there are Khomeinists with a Marxist angle.

In Jammu and Kashmir, a state where Muslims are in the majority, activities of the *Jamaat* are out in the open. **Jamaat-e-Tulaba**, the militant youth wing of the *Jamaat*, has long been preaching orthodoxy and obscurantism among the Muslim youth. In Delhi, led by the son of the Imam of the *Jama Masjid*, India's main mosque and one of the largest in Asia, Muslim militants have formed *Adam Sena* and *Ali Sena* societies. The *Ali Sena* activists have been reportedly carrying six-inch-long daggers in the form of the moon—the symbol of *Hazrat Ali's* hand of strength. In Bombay, Muslim leaders of the Mafia underground, noted for their smuggling skills, have also formed militant gangs. Recently, some of these Mafia dons have surfaced as political leaders in Uttar Pradesh.

According to researchers, the *Jamaat* is very close to both Saudi Arabia and the Khomeini regime. It receives money from Saudi Arabia, ostensibly for religious purposes. In 1980, *Jamaat-e-Tulaba* chief Sheikh *Tajmmul Islam* had threatened to launch “an Iran-type of struggle for an Islamic state.”

Since the Hindus and Muslims are 99% of India's popu-

lation, fundamentalist movements among these two groups are the predominant danger. However, in Kerala and in Tamil Nadu, and in the northeast of India, there exists a large number of Christians, mostly converted by the missionaries in the British days, or by the Portuguese. Even this small Christian community, which has so far stayed away from confrontation, has become more active. Revivalism is noticeable within their midst. In Kerala, the Kerala Congress Party, long a partner with the ruling parties, is heavily influenced by the local Christians. It is in Kerala that the RSS is coming into direct confrontation with the Christian church leaders as the politics of hate is being spread.

Regionalist currents

The fundamentalist wave coincides with, and is in some cases intensified by, the intense regionalism that has been institutionalized in India. Over the years the Indian states have been divided up on the basis of languages and other cultural-historic factors. Of the 25 states, only five use Hindi, the "official" language of the nation. The result is the persistence of a distinct language barrier to national integration. English, a medium which is used only by the elite, is not a language of the masses.

The strongest resistance to Hindi comes from the south. In the 1960s when the proposal to make Hindi the national language was pushed through, violence erupted in many states, with Tamil Nadu in the lead. In Tamil Nadu the first powerful regional-chauvinist party, Dravid Munneta Kazhagam (DMK), came to the fore. The party was conceived as an opposition to the local Brahmins, but it soon took the shape of a Tamil Party, an alternative to the national Congress Party then ruling the state. DMK, and the now-ruling AIADMK which was formed later and maintains an alliance with the Congress, still today denounce New Delhi's attempts to "impose" Hindi on Tamil Nadu as the focus of their political organizing.

In the early 1980s, a movie star, N.T. Rama Rao, launched his Telegu Desam (Land of the Telegu People) in Andhra Pradesh. Before Rama Rao had entered the scene, Andhra Pradesh was a Congress stronghold. But weakening of the Congress in the state, due to poor organizational efforts, brought in Telegu Desam, a chauvinistic Andhra Party with strong caste overtones.

The rise of regional-chauvinist parties is not confined to the South. In Jammu and Kashmir, where the Muslim fundamentalists are well entrenched, the latest election in March 1987 showed that the combined Muslim United Front (MUF) has become a recognizable political entity. MUF raised slogans for implementation of *Nizam-e-Mustafa*, or "law according to the Koran." In the west, in Maharashtra state, the chauvinistic **Shiv Sena** ("Soldiers of Shivaji," the 17th-century Marathi ruler) rules the city of Bombay. Formed as a Maharashtrian party for uplifting the Maharashtrians' lot in their state, Shiv Sena soon turned into an anti-Muslim sectarian group which rejects non-Maharashtrians. It controls

Bombay, India's most powerful metropolitan center, and recent reports indicate that the Sena is expanding into outlying districts of Maharashtra.

In the east, the hilly terrain makes communication and transportation difficult. Nestled within the Himalayan range, local tribes dominate state politics. An exception perhaps is Assam, where Hindus, Muslims, and various hill tribes live together. Still, the regional chauvinism, the determination to govern its own destiny free of "outside interference" (from New Delhi or Bangladeshi migrants) is as dominant in Assam as anywhere else. Bordering Bhutan and Bangladesh, two independent nations, Assam has been the scene of some of the most gruesome massacres. Now the peace has returned to Assam with the advent of a new government under the state-based party, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Formed 67 days before the 1983 elections, the AGP grabbed power from Congress (I) campaigning against the "invasions of foreigners into Assam." To ethnic Assamese, the 1983 elections were a replay of the decisive battle in which the Assamese warrior Lachit Barplinkan stopped the Mogul invasion on the banks of Brahmaputra.

From the hills to the coast, regionalism has become a more prominent feature of the political landscape. Except in the Hindi belt—along the mighty Ganga—where a sort of monolith exists, other states are becoming increasingly dominated by local demands and concerns. In certain bordering states, as in the case of Karnataka and Maharashtra, or Assam and Nagaland, territorial disputes have given in to violence. Chauvinists and provocateurs have destroyed peace and sanity for insignificant gains. If the regional chauvinist currents often act as a barrier to India's real integration, it is only some among them whose identity is rooted in confrontation—with "outsiders," be they citizens of another state, ethnic or language group, or New Delhi.

The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, for instance, has adopted measures to physically threaten those who come to Bombay from other parts of India to seek a living. In the east, a Bengali chauvinist group, masquerading as a political organization, Amra Bangali, has developed links with the communal RSS. Amra Bangali has created communal tension in the northeastern state of Tripura. In the hilly Darjeeling district of West Bengal, Nepalis, who dominate the district, have engaged in violent activities to push the campaign for what they call Gorkhaland—a separate state for the Gorkhas. In Punjab, the Sikhs' demands for Khalistan resulted in the murder of a prime minister.

By itself, the regional focus and emergence of regional political parties is not a fundamental threat to the national framework of India, and could be the source of greater political and economic dynamism. Many regional parties do have a national outlook, and are willing to work in harmony with New Delhi. Vigorous leadership to change economic and social conditions across the board would tend to transform regional parties into partners in a national enterprise, overriding the dangerous local chauvinisms that arise by default.