The Clash Within: Democracy and the Hindu Right

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Democracy Under Siege

On February 27, 2002, the Sabarmati express train arrived in the station of Godhra, in the state of Gujarat, bearing a large group of Hindu pilgrims who were returning from a pilgrimage to the alleged birthplace of the god Rama at Ayodhya (where some years earlier, angry Hindu mobs had destroyed the Babri mosque, which they claim is on top of the remains of Rama's birthplace). The pilgrimage, like many others in recent times, aimed at forcibly constructing a temple over the disputed site, and the mood of the returning passengers, frustrated in their aims by the government and the courts, was angrily emotional. When the train stopped at the station, passengers got into arguments with Muslim vendors and passengers. At least one Muslim vendor was beaten up when he refused to say “Jai Sri Ram” (“Hail Ram”), and a young Muslim girl narrowly escaped forcible abduction. As the train left the station, stones were thrown at it, apparently by Muslims.

Fifteen minutes later, one car of the train erupted in flames. Fifty-eight men, women, and children died in the fire. Most of the dead were Hindus. Because the area adjacent to the tracks was an area of Muslim dwellings, and because a Muslim mob had gathered in the region to protest the treatment of Muslims on the train platform, blame was immediately put on Muslims. Many people were arrested, and some of these are still in detention without charge – despite the fact that two independent inquiries into the event have established through careful sifting of the forensic evidence that the fire was most probably a tragic accident, caused by combustion from cook stoves carried on by the passengers and stored under the seats of the train.

In the days that followed, wave upon wave of violence swept through the state. The attackers were Hindus, many of them highly politicized, shouting Hindu-right slogans, such as “Hail Ram” (a religious invocation wrenched from its original devotional and peaceful meaning) and “Hail Hanuman” (a monkey god portrayed by the right as aggressive), along with “Kill, Destroy!” “Slaughter!” There is copious

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evidence that the violent retaliation was planned by Hindu extremist organizations before the precipitating event. No one was spared: young children were burned along with their families. Particularly striking was the number of women who were raped, mutilated, in some cases tortured with large metal objects, and then set on fire. Over the course of several weeks, approximately two thousand Muslims were killed. Approximately half of the dead were women, many of whom were raped and tortured before being killed and burned. Children were killed with their parents; fetuses were ripped from the bellies of pregnant women to be tossed into the fire.

Most alarming was the total breakdown in the rule of law – not only at the local level but also at that of state and national government. Police were ordered not to stop the violence. Some egged it on. Gujarat’s Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, rationalized and even encouraged the murders. He was later reelected on a platform that focused on religious hatred. (Because evidence of his criminal activity is so overwhelming, he has been denied a visa to enter the United States.) Meanwhile, the national government showed a culpable indifference. Prime Minister Vajpayee suggested that religious riots were inevitable wherever Muslims live alongside Hindus, and that troublemaking Muslims must have been to blame. Leading politicians conveyed the message that government would treat the nation’s citizens unequally: some would receive the full protection of the law, and others would not. Prosecutions resulting from the riots have faced related problems: the bias of local judges, the intimidation and bribery of witnesses.

While Americans have focused on the war on terror, Iraq, and the Middle East, democracy has been under siege in another part of the world. India – the most populous of all democracies, and a country whose Constitution protects human rights even more comprehensively than our own – has been in crisis. Until the spring of 2004, its parliamentary government was increasingly controlled by right-wing Hindu extremists who condone and in some cases actively support violence against minorities, especially the Muslim minority. Many seek fundamental changes in India’s pluralistic democracy. Despite their electoral loss, these political groups and the social organizations allied with them remain extremely powerful. Democracy and the rule of law have shown impressive strength and resilience, but the future is unclear.

What has been happening in India is a serious threat to the future of democracy in the world. The fact that it has yet to make it onto the radar screen of most Americans is evidence of the way in which terrorism and the war on Iraq have distracted Americans from events and issues of fundamental significance. If we really want to understand the impact of religious nationalism on democratic values, India currently provides a deeply troubling example, and one without which any understanding of the more general phenomenon is dangerously incomplete. It also provides an example of how democracy can survive the assault of religious extremism, from which all modern democracies can learn. In May 2004, the voters of India went to the polls in large numbers. Contrary to all predictions, they gave the Hindu right a resounding defeat. Because even exit polls, taken in cities and towns, did not predict the result,
it is clear that impoverished rural voters played a major role in giving India a new government.

In this lecture, I shall use the case of Gujarat as a lens through which to conduct a critical examination of the influential thesis of the “clash of civilizations,” made famous by Samuel Huntington. Huntington’s picture of the world as riven between democratic Western values and an aggressive Muslim monolith does nothing to help us understand today’s India, where the violent values of the Hindu right are imports from European fascism of the 1930s, and where the third-largest Muslim population in the world lives in peace, despite severe poverty and other inequalities. Through a study of this case, I shall argue that the real “clash of civilizations” is not the clash between “Islam” and “the West,” but, instead a clash within virtually all modern nations – between people who are prepared to live with others who are different, on terms of equal respect, and those who seek the protection of homogeneity, and the domination of a single “pure” religious and ethnic tradition. At a deeper level, this book’s thesis is the Gandhian claim that the real “clash of civilizations” is a clash within the individual self, between the urge to dominate and defile the other and a willingness to live respectfully on terms of compassion and equality, with all the vulnerability that such a life entails.

This argument about India will also suggest a way to see America, which is also torn between two different pictures of itself. One picture shows America and Americans as good and pure, its enemies as an external “axis of evil.” The other picture, the fruit of internal self-criticism, shows America to itself as complex and flawed, torn between forces bent on control and hierarchy and forces that promote democratic equality. At a deeper level, what I’ve called the Gandhian level, my “internal-clash” picture shows Americans to themselves as people each of whom is capable of both respect and aggression, of both democratic mutuality and anxious domination. As George Kennan wrote:

I wish I could believe that the human impulses which give rise to the nightmares of totalitarianism were ones which Providence had allocated only to other peoples and to which the American people had been graciously left immune. Unfortunately, I know this is not true... The fact of the matter is that there is a little bit of the totalitarian buried somewhere, way down deep, in each and every one of us.¹

My argument, then, is focused on India, but it is also pertinent to other countries: for, as Nehru said on the eve of India’s independence, “all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for any one of them to imagine that it can live apart.”

The Ideology of the Hindu Right

According to the Huntington thesis, each “civilization” has its own rather unitary distinctive view of life, and Hinduism counts as a distinct “civilization.” If we investigate the history of the Hindu right, however, we will see a very different story: traditional Hinduism was decentralized, plural, and highly tolerant, so much so that the vision of a unitary “pure” Hinduism that could provide the new nation with an aggressive ideology of homogeneity could not be found in India at all: the founders of the Hindu right had to import it from Europe. Today, European fascism is seated right at the heart of what parades, in some quarters at least, as Hindu civilization.

The Hindu Right’s view of history is a simple one; like all simple tales, it is largely a fabrication, but its importance to the movement may be seen by the intensity with which its members go after scholars who present a more nuanced and accurate view: not only by strident public critiques, but by organized campaigns of threat and intimidation, culminating in some cases in physical violence. Here’s how the story goes:

Once there lived in the Indus valley a pure and peaceful people. They spoke Vedic Sanskrit, a language revealed as that of the gods when the immortal Vedas were given to humanity. They had a rich material culture, well suited to sustain their prosperous life. Despite their peaceful temper, they were also well prepared for war: they had chariots, and even horses. Their realm was vast, stretching from Kashmir in the North to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in the South. And yet they saw unity and solidarity in their shared ways of life, calling themselves Hindus and their land Hindustan. No class divisions troubled them; nor was caste a painful source of division. The condition of women was excellent.

This peaceful condition went on for centuries. Although from time to time marauders made their appearance at this people’s doorstep (for example the Huns), they were quickly dispatched, because this people was aggressive when it needed to be, and its warlike strength was feared far and wide. Suddenly, rudely, unprovoked, invading Muslims put an end to all that. The early medieval period saw brief incursions by Muslims bent on the destruction of Hindu temples; these, however, proved short-lived. Disaster struck with a heavier hand, however, when Babur swept through the North of Hindustan early in the sixteenth century, vandalizing Hindu temples, stealing sacred objects, building mosques over temple ruins. For two hundred years, Hindus lived at the mercy of the marauders, until the Maharashtrian hero Shivaji rose up against the aliens and drove them back, restoring the Hindu kingdom. His success, however, was all too brief. Soon the British East India company and then the British themselves took up where Babur and his progeny had left off, imposing a tyranny upon Hindustan and her people. In short, despite the flawless excellence of indigenous Hindu culture, the men of Hindustan have lived for centuries in a humiliated condition. They can recover pride in themselves only by concerted aggression against alien elements in their midst. If they rise to the occasion, they can restore the original bliss, the time when Rama ruled the world with his blessings.
What is wrong with this picture? Well, for a start, the people who spoke Sanskrit almost certainly migrated into the subcontinent from outside, finding indigenous people there, probably the ancestors of the Dravidian peoples of South India. Hindus are no more indigenous than Muslims. Second, it leaves out problems in Hindu society: the problem of caste, which both Gandhi and Tagore took to be the central social problem facing India, and obvious problems of class and gender inequality. (When historians point to evidence of these things, they call them Marxists, as if that by itself invalidated the arguments.) Third, it leaves out the tremendous regional differences within Hinduism, and hostilities and aggressions sometimes associated with those. Fourth, it omits the evidence of peaceful coexistence and syncretism between Hindus and Muslims for a good deal of the Moghul Empire, including Akbar’s well-known policies of religious pluralism. Muslims are nothing but bad, aggressive.

In the Hindu right version of history, a persistent theme is that of humiliated masculinity. According to the received story, Hindus have been subordinate for centuries, and their masculinity insulted, in part because they have not been aggressive and violent enough. Even while the violence of the conquerors is decried, Hindu males are encouraged to emulate that aggressive and warlike demeanor. Rabindranath Tagore, deeply perceptive here as always, represents his Hindu nationalist anti-hero, in The Home and the World, as wishing he could seize the woman he desires by force, but finds himself unable to do so. He blames this inability on his Hindu heritage, and wishes for a different nature. He says that there are two different sorts of music, the sound of the Hindu flute and the sound of the British military band. He wishes that he could hear in his blood the sound of the military band, rather than that disturbingly non-aggressive flute.

The two leading ideologues of the Hindu Right, who in different ways responded to this call for a warlike Hindu masculinity, are V. D. Savarkar, a freedom fighter who spent years in a British prison in the Andaman Islands, and who may have been a co-conspirator in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, and M. S. Golwalkar, a gurulike figure who was not involved in the independence struggle and who quietly, behind the scenes, built up the organization called the RSS (National Corps of Volunteers) that is now the leading social organization of the Hindu right. Savarkar’s Hindutva: Who is a Hindu, first published in 1923, undertakes to define the essence of Hinduness for the new nation; his definition is exclusionary, emphasizing cultural homogeneity and the need to use force to ensure the supremacy of Hindus. For reasons of time, however, I shall focus on Golwalkar’s We, or Our Nationhood Defined, published in 1939. Some of the remarks that I am about to quote are embarrassing to Hindus today, and members of the Hindu right hasten to assure one that Golwalkar knew nothing about the Holocaust and withdrew the offending statements in editions of the book published after the war. But 1939 was still after the Nuremberg laws (1935) and Kristallnacht (1938); moreover, my own copy of the fourth edition, published in 1947, still contains the statements, as quoted here.

Writing during the Independence struggle, Golwalkar sees his task as describing the unity of the new nation. He announces that most Indians’ ideas about nationhood are mistaken. “They are not in conformity with those of the Western Political
Scientists. . . . It is but proper, therefore, at this stage to understand what the Western Scholars state as the Universal Nation-idea and correct ourselves. With this end in view, we shall now proceed with stating and analyzing the World’s accepted Nation-concept.” Notice the unselfconscious deference to European scholarship as what “the World” thinks.

Golwalkar now turns to English dictionaries and to British and German political science. The five elements that he finds repeated as hallmarks of national unity are: geography, race, religion, culture, and language. Golwalkar examines each of these in turn and then analyzes several nations to see to what extent they embody the desired unities. Germany impresses him especially for the way in which it has managed to bring “under one sway the whole of the territory” that was originally held by the Germani but that was parceled out under different regimes. Turning to race, he observes:

German race pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country the semitic Races – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by.

In the end, Golwalkar’s vision of national unity is not exactly that of Nazi Germany. He is not very concerned with purity of blood, and far more concerned with a group’s desire to merge into the dominant whole. Groups who fall outside the five-fold definition of nationhood, he concludes, can “have no place in the national life…unless they abandon their differences, and completely merge themselves in the National Race. So long, however, as they maintain their racial, religious and culture differences, they cannot but be only foreigners, who may be either friendly or inimical to the Nation.” Unlike Hitler, Golwalkar would probably be happy with the conduct of the many German Jews who converted to Christianity and assimilated their lifestyle to the dominant German lifestyle. Nonetheless, he is firmly against the civic equality of any people who retain their religious and ethnic distinctiveness, refusing to merge into the dominant Hindu whole. He speaks approvingly of the idea that people who refuse to assimilate will lose their civil rights, living “at the sufferance of the Nation and deserving of no special protection, far less any privilege or rights.” Here is the way in which Golwalkar applies his ruminations about the “old nations” of Europe to the case of India:

There are only two courses open to the foreign elements: either to merge themselves in the national race and adopt its culture, or to live at the sweet will of the national race. That is the only logical and correct solution. That alone keeps the national life healthy and undisturbed. That alone keeps the Nation safe from the danger of a cancer developing into its body politics [sic] of the creation of a state within the state. From this standpoint, sanctioned by

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2 Golwalkar, We, or Our Nationhood Defined (Nagpur: Bahrat Prakashan, 1939), p. 21.
3 Golwalkar, We, or Our Nationhood Defined, p. 42.
4 Golwalkar, We, or Our Nationhood Defined, p. 43.
5 Golwalkar, We, or Our Nationhood Defined, p. 53.
the experiences of shrewd old nations, the non-Hindu peoples in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture i.e. they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its agelong traditions but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead – in one word they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen’s rights. There is, at least should be, no other course for them to adopt.6

At this time, the RSS was a cultural movement without a distinct political arm. It disavowed connection with the more political Hindu Mahasabha, which later did propose that Muslims and Christians would lose all civil rights in the new nation. Clearly, however, this is his program, and we should not doubt that such aims lie underneath the modern political arm of the RSS, the political party known as the BJP.

At the time of independence, such ideas of Hindu supremacy did not prevail. Nehru and Gandhi insisted not only on equal rights for all citizens but on the most stringent protections for religious freedom of expression in the new Constitution. Gandhi always pointedly included Muslims at the very heart of his movement, and a devout Muslim, Maulana Azad, was not only one of his and Nehru’s most trusted advisors, he was the person to whom Gandhi turned to accept food when he broke his fast unto death, a very pointed assault on sectarian ideas of purity and pollution. Such ideas never went uncontested.

On January 30, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was shot at point-blank range by Nathuram Godse, member of the Hindu Mahasabha and former member of the RSS. Godse, who edited a newspaper called Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) had left RSS because it seemed to him not political enough; the Mahasabha, a political party, was more congenial. As was shown by a letter written by Godse to Savarkar in 1938 and submitted to the trial court, Godse had long had a close relationship with Savarkar, whom he revered. “Since the time you were released from your internment at Ratnagiri,” he wrote, “a divine fire has kindled in the minds of those groups who profess that Hindustan is for the Hindus.”7 He speaks of using the Hindu Mahasabha (of which Savarkar was then President) to build a National Volunteer Army, drawing on the resources of the RSS, where Godse was then a leading local organizer.

At his sentencing on November 8, 1949,8 Godse read a long (book-length) statement of self-explanation, justifying his assassination for posterity. Although the statement was not permitted publication at the time, it gradually leaked out into the public. Translations into Indian languages began appearing, and in 1977 the English original was published by Godse’s brother Gopal under the polite title, May it Please Your Honour. A new edition, with a long epilogue by Gopal, was published

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6 Golwalkar, We, or Our Nationhood Defined, pp. 55–56.
8 Koenraad Elst, Gandhi and Godse, (2001), p. 3.
in 1993 under the more precise title Why I Assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. Today the statement is also widely available on the Internet, where Godse is something of a hero on Hindu right websites, revered as a hero, and, on one website entirely devoted to his career, known as “The True Patriot and the True Indian.” (This website also contains the text of a recent Marathi-language play glorifying Godse that has been banned in India.)

Godse’s self-justification, like the historical accounts of both Savarkar and Golwalkar, sees recent events against the backdrop of centuries of “Muslim tyranny” in India, punctuated by the heroic resistance of Shivaji, the eighteenth century Hindu leader who led a briefly successful rebellion against Moghul rule. Like Savarkar, he describes his goal as that of creating a strong, proud, India that can throw off the centuries of domination. Godse is appalled by Gandhi’s rejection of the warlike heroes of classical Hindu epics: “It is my firm belief that in dubbing Rama, Krishna and Arjuna as guilty of violence, the Mahatma betrayed a total ignorance of the springs of human action.” Indeed, he argues, it is Gandhi who is the more guilty of violence, since he exposes Indians to subordination and humiliation: “He was, paradoxical as it may appear, a violent pacifist who brought untold calamities on the country in the name of truth and non-violence, while Shivaji [and other resistance fighters] will remain enshrined in the hearts of their countrymen for ever for the freedom they brought to them.” (So deep was Godse’s objection to non-violence that he earlier refused the offer to commute his sentence to life imprisonment, saying, “Please, see to it that mercy is not imposed on me. I want to show that through me, Gandiji’s non-violence is being hanged.”)

Godse’s second major objection to Gandhi is to his “pro-Muslim policy,” which he sees in many aspects of Gandhi’s politics, for example his support for Urdu alongside Hindi as national languages, and his willingness to placate Jinnah and the Muslim League. Gandhi, he argues, has betrayed his role as father of the Indian nation and has become the father of Pakistan.

Godse tells us that he gradually came to the conclusion that Gandhi’s (to him) disastrous policies could only be brought to an end by ending Gandhi’s life. Such was Gandhi’s personal charisma that so long as he lived, the Congress Party would have to “be content with playing second fiddle to all his eccentricity, whimsicality, metaphysics and primitive vision.” Gandhi’s “childish insanities and obstinacies, coupled with a most severe austerity of life, ceaseless work and lofty character made Gandhi formidable and irresistible.” So, he planned in secret, he says, telling nobody about his plans, and fired the fatal shots.

Toward the end of Godse’s statement appears a passage that heads the Hindu-right website devoted to his memory:

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9 See Elst, Gandhi and Godse, pp. 5–6.
11 Hindi and Urdu are not very different as languages; they are slightly different dialects at most. The major difference between them is the script in which they are written: Persian script, in the case of Urdu, Devanagari (the Sanskrit script) in the case of Hindi. Thus it is odd to apply the ideas of linguistic nationalism to this question.
If devotion to one’s country amounts to a sin, I admit I have committed that sin. If it is meritorious, I humbly claim the merit thereof. I fully and confidently believe that if there be any other court of justice beyond the one founded by the mortals, my act will not be taken as unjust. If after the death there be no such place to reach or to go, there is nothing to be said. I have resorted to the action I did purely for the benefit of the humanity. I do say that my shots were fired at the person whose policy and action had brought rack and ruin and destruction to lakhs [tens of thousands] of Hindus.

Nehru believed that the murder of Gandhi was part of a “fairly widespread conspiracy” on the part of the Hindu right to seize power; he saw the situation as analogous to that in Europe on the eve of the fascist takeovers. And he believed that the RSS was the power behind this conspiracy. In December 1947, he had already written to the provincial governors:

We have a great deal of evidence to show that the RSS is an organization which is in the nature of a private army and which is definitely proceeding on the strictest Nazi lines, even following the technique of organization…. I have some knowledge of the way the Nazi movement developed in Germany. It attracted by its superficial trappings and strict discipline considerable numbers of lower middle class young men and women who are normally not too intelligent and for whom life appears to offer little to attract them.

For reasons of time, we must now fast-forward to recent years. Although illegal for a time, the RSS eventually reemerged, and quietly went to work building a vast social network, consisting largely of groups for young boys, called “branches” or shakas, which, through clever use of games and songs, indoctrinate the young into the confrontational and Hindu-supremacist ideology of the organization. The idea of total obedience and the abnegation of the critical faculties is at the core of this solidaristic movement. Each day, as members raise the saffron flag of the warlike hero Shivaji, which the movement prefers to the tricolor flag of the Indian nation, with its Buddhist wheel of law reminding citizens of the emperor Ashoka’s devotion to religious toleration, they recite the following pledge: “I take the oath that I will always protect the purity of Hindu religion, and the purity of Hindu culture, for the supreme progress of the Hindu nation. I have become a component of the RSS. I will do the work of the RSS with utmost sincerity and unselfishness and with all my body, soul, and resources. And I will keep this vow for as long as I live. Victory to Mother India.” The organization also makes clever use of modern media: a nationally televised serial version of the classic epic Ramayana, in the late 1980s, fascinated viewers all over India with its concocted tale of a unitary Hinduism dedicated to the single-minded worship of the god Rama and to his birthplace at Ayodhya in north India. As a result of the propaganda stirred up in this and other ways, in 1992 Hindu mobs, with the evident connivance of the modern political wing of the RSS, the party known as the BJP, or Bharatiya Janata Party (National People’s Party) destroyed a mosque in the city of Ayodhya that they say covers the remains of a Hindu temple marking Rama’s birthplace.

13 Ibid.
Meanwhile, politically, the BJP began to gather strength in the late 1980s, drawing on widespread public dissatisfaction with the economic policies of the post-Nehru Congress party (although it was actually Congress, under Rajiv Gandhi, that began economic reforms), and playing, always, the cards of hatred and fear. It was during their ascendancy, in a coalition government that prevented them from carrying out all of their goals, that the destruction of the Ayodyha mosque took place. The violence in Gujarat was the culmination of a series of increasingly angry pilgrimages to the Ayodyha site, where the Hindu right has attempted to construct a Hindu temple over the ruins, but has been frustrated by the courts. Although the elections of 2004 gave a negative verdict on the BJP government, they remain the major opposition party and control state governments in some key states, including, today, Gujarat.

Lessons of Gujarat

For several years I have studied the Gujarat violence, its basis and its aftermath, looking for its implications for the ways in which we should view religious violence around the world. One obvious conclusion to draw is that each case must be studied on its own merits, with close attention to specific historical and regional factors. The idea that all conflict are explained by a simple hypothesis of the “clash of civilizations” proves utterly inadequate in the fact of Gujarat, where European ideas, borrowed to address a perceived humiliation, were used to create an ideology that has ultimately led to a great deal of violence against peaceful Muslims, and to the threat of more violence to come. Indeed, the clash of civilizations thesis is the best friend of the perpetrators, because it shields them and their ideology from scrutiny. Repeatedly in interviews with leading members of this group, I was informed that no doubt, as an American, I was already on their side, knowing that Muslims cause trouble wherever they are, and that there is nothing for it but to be prepared to take reactive, and even preemptive, measures against them. What we see in Gujarat is not that simplistic comforting thesis, it is something more disturbing: the fact that in a thriving democracy many individuals are unable to live with others who are different, on terms of mutual respect and amity. They seek total domination as the only road to security and pride. This is a phenomenon that is well known in democracies around the world, and it has nothing to do with an alleged Muslim monolith, and, really, very little to do with religion as such. (I’ve noted that the Hindu right are bent on recasting Hinduism into a newly violent and monolithic form.)

This case, then, informs us that we must look within, asking whether in our own society similar forces are at work, and, if so, what we might do to counteract them. Beyond that general insight, my study of the riots has suggested four very specific lessons.

1. The Rule of Law

One of the most appalling aspects of Gujarat was the complicity of officers of the law. Police sat on their hands, and indeed were ordered to do so, on penalty of
demotion or transfer. The highest officials of state government, prominently including Chief Minister Narendra Modi, egged on the killing. The national government gave aid and comfort to the state government. The worst aspect of the unequal status of Muslims in Gujarat was this inequality before the law: Muslims at present are not equal citizens.

The institutions of government broke down at the local level, and to some extent at the national level. However, the institutional and legal structure of the Indian democracy ultimately proved robust, playing a key role in securing justice for the victims. The Supreme Court and the National Electoral Commission played very constructive roles in postponing new elections while Muslims were encouraged to return home, and in ordering change of venue in key trials arising out of the violence. Above all, there were free national elections in 2004, and these elections, in which the participation of poor rural voters was decisive, delivered a strongly negative verdict on the policies fear and hate, as well as the BJP’s economic policies. The current government, headed by Manmohan Singh, India’s first minority Prime Minister, has announced a firm commitment to end sectarian violence and has done a great deal to focus attention on the unequal economic and political situation of Muslims in the nation, as well as appointing Muslims to key offices. On balance, then, the pluralistic democracy envisaged by Gandhi and Nehru seems to be winning, in part because the framers had bequeathed to India a wise institutional and constitutional structure and traditions of commitment to the key political values this structure embodies.

It should be mentioned that one of the key aspects of the founders’ commitments, which so far has survived the Hindu-right challenge, is the general conception of the nation and its unity as a unity around political ideals and values, particularly the value of equal entitlement, rather than around ethnic or religious or linguistic identity. India, like the United States, but unlike most of the nations of Europe, has rejected such exclusionary ways of characterizing the nation, adopting, in the Constitution, in public ceremonies, and in key public symbols, the political conception of its unity. India’s national anthem, words and music composed by Rabindranath Tagore, is a paean to pluralism: it mentions the diverse ethno-geographical origins of Indians, and praises the fact that all alike show reverence to the moral law. This public commitment to pluralism is continually contested by the Hindu right, who prefer another anthem, warlike and exclusionary. So far, however, the founders’ strategy has held firm. Political structure is not everything, but it can supply a great deal in times of stress.

2. The Press and the role of Intellectuals

One of the heartening aspects of Gujarat was the performance of the national media and of the community of intellectuals. Both print media and television kept up unceasing pressure to document and investigate the riots, and the role of key government officials was documented beyond doubt. At the same time, because the local police were not doing their job, many scholars, lawyers, and NGO leaders converged on Gujarat to take down the testimony of witnesses, help them file complaints, and prepare a public record that would stand up in court. The intellectual
community has easier access to the national press in India than in the U.S., in part thanks to the somewhat greater financial independence of the national media, and these intellectuals seized the opportunity, producing a wonderful outpouring of trenchant and high-quality analysis. The only reason I felt the need to write about these events further myself is that these analyses have by and large not reached the U.S. audience. We can see here documentation of something long ago observed by Amartya Sen in the context of famines: the crucial role of a free press in supporting democratic institutions. And we can study here what freedom really means: I would argue that it requires a certain absence of top-down corporate control and an easy access to the major media of intellectual voices from a wide range of backgrounds. We in the U.S. should take note.

3. Education: the importance of critical thinking and imagination

So far I have mentioned factors that have helped the Indian democracy survive the threat of quasi-fascist takeover. Now we move to warning signs for the future, areas in which the democracy is currently weak and vulnerable. The public schools of the state of Gujarat are famous for their complete lack of critical thinking, their exclusive emphasis on rote learning and the uncritical learning of marketable skills, and for the elements of fascist propaganda that easily creep in when critical thinking is not cultivated. It is well known that Hitler is presented as a hero in history textbooks in this state, and nationwide public protest has not yet led to any change in this regard. To some extent the rest of the nation is better off than Gujarat: national-level textbooks have been rewritten to take out the false ideological view of history loved by the Hindu right and to substitute a much more nuanced view of history. Nonetheless, the emphasis on rote learning and on regurgitation for national examinations is distressing everywhere, and things are only becoming worse with the immense pressure to produce economically productive graduates. The educational culture of India used to contain progressive voices, such as the great Tagore, who emphasized that all the skills in the world were useless, even baneful, if not wielded by a cultivated imagination and refined critical faculties. Currently, these voices have been silenced by the sheer demand for profitability in the global market. Parents want their children to learn marketable skills, and their great pride is the admission of a child to the Indian Institutes of Technology and Management. They have contempt for the humanities and the arts. I fear for democracy down the road, when it is run, as it increasingly will be, by docile engineers in the Gujarat mold, unable to criticize the propaganda of politicians and unable to imagine the pain of another human being.

This is no humorous topic, but it can be illustrated by an odd story from my own experience investigating the Gujarati community in the United States, where fully 40% of Indian-Americans hail from that state. A large proportion of Gujarati Hindus belong to the Swaminarayan sect of Hinduism, which at present is distinctive for its emphasis on uncritical obedience to the utterances of the current head of the sect, whose title is Pramukh Swami. On a visit to the elaborate multi-million dollar Swaminarayan temple in Bartlett Illinois, I was given a tour by a young man recently
arrived from Gujarat, who delighted in telling me the simplistic Hindu-right story of India’s history, and who emphatically told me that whenever Pramukh Swami speaks one is to regard it as the direct voice of God and obey without question. At this point, with a beatific smile, this young man pointed up to the elaborate marble ceiling of the temple and asked me “Do you know why this ceiling glows the way it does?” I said I didn’t know, and I confidently expected an explanation invoking the spiritual powers of Pramukh Swami. My guide smiled even more broadly. “Fiber-optic cables,” he told me. “We are the first ones to put this technology into a temple.” Here you see what can easily wreck democracy: a combination of technological sophistication with utter docility. I fear that many democracies around the world, including our own, are going down this road, through a lack of emphasis on the humanities and arts and an unbalanced emphasis on profitable skills.

4. The Creation of a Liberal Public Culture

How did fascism take such a hold in India? Hindu traditions emphasize tolerance and pluralism, and daily life in India, as in New York, tend to emphasize the ferment and vigor of difference, as people from so many different ethnic, linguistic, and regional backgrounds encounter one another. But the traditions contain a wound, a locus of vulnerability, and I would locate this wound in the area of humiliated masculinity. For centuries, some Hindu males think, they have been subordinated, laughed at, treated as weak, by a sequence of conquerors. The fact that the British really did despise Hinduism as what Winston Churchill called a “beastly religion” surely made matters worse, and Hindus came to identify the sexual playfulness and sensuousness of their traditions, scorned by the masters of the Raj, with their own weakness and subjection. So, a repudiation of the sensuous and the cultivation of the masculinity typified by Tagore’s image of the British military band came to seem the best way out of subjection. One reason why the RSS attracts such a following is this widespread sense of masculine failure, a key aspect of the rhetoric of both Savarkar and Golwalkar, and of RSS shakhas in every part of India today.

At the same time, the RSS filled a void, organizing at the grass-roots level with great discipline and selflessness. The RSS is not just about fascist organization: it also provides needed social services, and it provides fun, luring boys in with the promise of a group life that has both more solidarity and more imagination than the tedious world of government schools. Golwalkar said that if he saw a beautiful peacock in his garden and wanted the peacock to become his pet, he would feed it little bits of opium until it became addicted, and that way it would come to his garden every day. He said that this was how the shakas work: by the lure of fun and games, they make boys obedient members of the organization.

So what is needed is some counter-force, which would supply a public culture of pluralism with equally efficient grass-roots organization, and a public culture of masculinity that would contend against the appeal of the warlike and rapacious masculinity purveyed by the Hindu Right. The “clash within” is not so much a clash between two groups in a nation who are different from birth, it is, at bottom, a clash
within each person, in which the ability to life with others on terms of mutual respect and equality contends anxiously against anxiety and the sense of being humiliated. Gandhi understood this. During his lifetime, his powerful movement did purvey a counter-image to the images of domineering masculinity. He taught his followers that life’s real struggle was a struggle within the self, against one’s own need to dominate and one’s fear of being vulnerable. He deliberately focused attention on sexuality as an arena in which domination plays itself out with pernicious effect, and he deliberately cultivated an androgynous maternal persona. I think that in some respects he went off the tracks, in his suggestion that sexual relations are inherently scenes of domination and in his recommendation of asceticism as the only route to non-domination. Nonetheless, he saw the problem at its root, and he proposed a public culture that, while he lived, was sufficient to address it. His followers understood that being a real man does not mean emulating British aggressiveness and learning to bash others. It meant having the courage not to bash, to stand up to aggression with nothing but one’s naked human dignity around one. In the process, he won the respect of the entire world for India’s men and their traditions (conceived as he conceived them). In a quite different way, Rabindranath Tagore also created a counter-image of the Indian self, an image that was more sensuous, more joyful than that of Gandhi, but equally bent on renouncing the domination that Tagore saw as inherent in European traditions.

After Gandhi, however, this part of the pluralist program has languished. Much though he loved and admired both Gandhi and Tagore, Nehru had contempt for religion, and out of his contempt he neglected the cultivation of that which the radical religions of both men had supplied: images of who we are as citizens, symbolic connections to the roots of human vulnerability and openness, and the creation of a grassroots public culture around these symbols. Nehru was a great institution-builder, but in thinking about the public culture of the new nation his focus was always on economic issues, not so much on cultural issues. Because he firmly expected that raising the economic level of the poor would cause them to lose the need for religion and in general for emotional sources of nourishment, he saw no need to provide a counterforce to the powerful emotional propaganda of the Hindu right. Today’s young people in India, therefore, tend to think of religion, and symbolic culture-creation in general, as forces that are in their very nature fascist and reactionary, because that is what they have seen in their experience. When one tells them the story of the U. S. civil rights movement, and the role of both liberal religion and powerful pluralist rhetoric in forging an anti-racist civic culture in that movement, they are quite surprised. Meanwhile, the RSS, which understands human psychology rather well, goes to work unopposed in every state and region, skillfully plucking the strings of hate and fear. By now pluralists generally realize that a mistake was made in leaving grassroots organization to the right, but it is very difficult to jump-start a public pluralist movement. The salient exception has been, for some years, the women’s movement, which has built at the grass-roots very skillfully, with the regional knowledge, the mixture of economic and cultural incentives, and the respect for the arts and the imagination, that the creation of such a movement requires.
It is comforting for Americans to talk about a clash of civilizations. This thesis tells us that evil is outside, distant, other, and that we are perfectly all right as we are. All we need do is to remain ourselves and fight the good fight. But the case of Gujarat shows us that the world is very different from the world as depicted in that comforting fable. The forces that assail democracy are internal to many if not most democratic nations, and they are not foreign: they are our own ideas and voices, meaning the voices of aggressive European nationalism, refracted back against the original aggressor with the extra bile of resentment born of a long experience of domination and humiliation. The implication of this idea is that all nations, Western and non-Western, need to examine themselves with the most fearless exercise of the critical capacities, looking for the roots of domination within and devising effective institutional and educational counter-measures. At a deeper level, the case of Gujarat shows us what Gandhi and Tagore in their different ways knew very well: that the real root of domination lies deep in the human personality, in the narcissistic desire to dominate others and to efface the inconvenient challenge posed by the other; in wounded masculinity that cannot rest until it has destroyed the source of its own perceived wound. It would be so convenient if Americans were pure and free from flaw: but we can now see that very fantasy of purity for what it is: as yet another form that the resourceful narcissism of the human personality takes on the way to bad behavior.

Looking at the clash in my way, as an internal clash, we will naturally focus on four strategies for the preservation and enhancement of democracy around the world: first, on getting institutional structures that can remain firm against fascist challenges; second, on bolstering the independence, including economic independence of the press and the free speech of intellectuals; third, on creating educational institutions that teach the skills of critical thinking and imagining that are so crucial for the health of democracy. And finally – what Martin Luther King, Jr. learned from Gandhi – creating a public culture of non-domination and equality that can inspire fearful human beings, for all of us are fearful, with the idea that comfort is to be found in mutual aid and reciprocity, rather than the quick and dirty victory over an enemy onto whom we have all too conveniently projected the negative aspects of our own history and our own anxious thinking.