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Anastasia Piliavsky

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India's Little Political Tradition

Anastasia Piliavsky

People across India's landscape and political spectrum deify their political leaders, subjecting them to lavish rituals of veneration. They festoon politicians with flower garlands, bedeck them with crowns and swords, enshrine them in temples and douse their *murtis* in milk, curds, and ghee. This happens during elections as much as between them, in cities as well as in villages, in the Communist Party as much as in the BJP. The worship of politicians is as crucial an institution of India's democracy as elections, as important to how political representatives and the people that they represent relate. Yet while political analysts devote much energy to elections, in their writings politician worship simply does not feature. Its descriptions appear in ethnographic accounts,¹ but, as far as mainstream political analysts (in journalism and academe) are concerned, this is India's quaint and quirky exotica, the stuff of religion or tradition, an element of cultural style with no political substance, meaning, or consequence.²



And little wonder. Today's professional political analysts, whether in popular media or in academe, are heirs to ways of thinking about politics, and indeed of conceptualizing "the

CONTACT Anastasia Piliavsky ✉ anastasia.piliavsky@kcl.ac.uk

¹For example, Michelutti, *Vernacularisation of Democracy*; Forbess and L. Michelutti, "From the mouth of God"; Piliavsky, *Introduction*; "India's Human Democracy"; Prasad, *Cine-politics*; Sen and Nielsen, "Gods in the public sphere".

²While Anglophone newspapers react to such practices with bemusement or condescension, most prominent commentators on Indian politics (such as Partha Chatterjee, Ram Guha, or Sunil Khilnani) afford them no space in their analyses.

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political,” that were forged in Europe. There, the idea of “politics” as a discrete domain of human activity and judgment, a domain that can be analyzed in separate terms, and have a theory of its own, was inseparable from the creation of an idea of an equally discrete domain of “religion.”³ The long and bitter divorce between state and church in Europe,⁴ the creation of separate institutions, buildings, vocabularies, and moral jurisdictions⁵ did not result in a clean break, even if it (more or less) succeeded in separating “religion” from “politics” in modern state law. As Carl Schmidt observed in his writings on “political theology,” the specter of religion haunts secular politics: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”⁶ From the single chief deity (secularized as law) to the sacred text (constitution) to the vision of community as a collective of equal individuals, the modern state has reproduced Christian ideas and institutions. This is not only a historical, but also an ethnographic fact. And yet modern state politics *ought* to be pure of religion, which leaves Western Political Theory in a state of permanent denial, a relation of hostility towards religion, aimed at keeping things that cannot be kept pure of one another apart.

This is nowhere more audible than in analyses of Indian politics, where, if religion features at all, it does so almost exclusively as a dangerous contaminant: as Hindu nationalism or Muslim extremism that threaten India’s secularism, pluralism, tolerance, and social peace.⁷ Religion has, no doubt, been a dangerous weapon in the hands of India’s demagogues. But this is “religion” as *ideology*, a set of abstract, universalizing assertions, a contrived and highly cathected collection of normative tenets, an “ism.”⁸ Religious isms, in India or anywhere else, do draw on theologies, on scholarly texts and scholastic articulations of belief, which Robert Redfield noted were part of the Great traditions.⁹ The greatness of Great Traditions is not demographic, for they are the provenance of the elite few.¹⁰ Purveyors of Hindu nationalism have certainly managed to democratize one recent variant of the Great Tradition – a protestantized Ramayan-ist Hindu-ism. Hindu nationalist temples, icons, and shrines now pepper the Indian landscape; Hindu nationalist rhetoric fills newspapers, chatrooms, and TV studios; it is paraded on streets, visible in communities cleft by religious violence.

And yet, this is not the religion of India’s everyday life. The everyday religion is local, domestic, and intimate, comprised of daily routines, lifecycle and household rituals, street-corner goddesses, ancestor-deities, spirit healers, and tree shrines. This is what Redfield called the “little” or “folk” tradition. What pulls all these practices into a single tradition, or a single religion even, is neither their folksiness (they are practiced by educated and illiterate Indians alike) nor the size of communities they are practiced in (they are just as present in metropolises as in villages). Unlike the Great Tradition, the Little Tradition does not cohere around a sacred text (the *Ramayana*), a set of moral tenets (the sacredness of the cow, vegetarianism, teetotalism, etc.), or pantheon of deities (Ram, Sita, Hanuman). Elements of the Little Tradition do find echoes in Hindu

³Dumont, *Religion, Politics, and Society; From Mandeville to Marx*.

⁴Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*.

⁵On this, see Skinner, *Machiavelli* and Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*.

⁶Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

⁷For example, Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*; Brass, *Theft of an Idol*; Hansen, *Saffron Wave*; Talbot, *Deadly Embrace*.

⁸Lorenzen, “Who invented Hinduism”.

⁹Redfield, “Social Organization of Tradition”; *Little Community*.

¹⁰Singer, “Cultural Pattern”; Obeyesekere, “The Great Tradition”.

epics and scriptures, but it is not defined or often even based on them; it offers no moral prescriptions and its gods are as many and varied as the people who worship them. This tradition is organized around a set of shared relational principles – ideas about how one should relate to beings more powerful than you. These can be divine or human beings because the Little Tradition draws no category distinction between divinity and humanity. Gods were once human and humans at various stages of life are treated as gods.¹¹ Thus relations with superiors, human and divine, take on identical forms, from honorifics used to address them to rituals of deference and gestures used in interactions with them.¹² What distinguishes divine and human superiors is not their divinity or humanity, but the fact that they have special potencies, that they can do what others cannot, that they can do things to others and for them. Rites of deference to which people in India subject their divine and human superiors are not self-humiliation. On the contrary, they are acts of purposeful humility aimed at taming, domesticating superiors and so compelling them to exercise their powers for their subordinates' good. While subordinates owe deference, service and loyalty, superordinates owe generous protection and care in return.¹³

This tradition of the deep, intimate India is thus elementally political. Its conceptual matrix rests on the recognition of power differences, and its ritual life regulates power relations. It regulates them not only through rules of exchange, but also by imbuing these relations with moral content: it gives subordinates leverage over their superiors and thus creates a structure of *mutual* responsibility in an otherwise asymmetric relation.¹⁴ If the structure of religious relations is fundamentally political, the structure of political relations is fundamentally religious. This is to say that relations thought of as “political” in Euro-American imagination follow the same rules and norms as relations thought to be “religious.” Historians have written extensively about this in pre-colonial settings, showing the inseparability of royalty and divinity in pre-modern Indian political practice and thought. They showed that, just as deities here were royals who “ruled” over their subjects, kings were divine embodiments of prosperity and auspicious sights.¹⁵

And yet, when one reads studies of contemporary politics, it is as if in 1947 all this suddenly changed.¹⁶ It is as if one fine morning the Indian populace woke up and decided that forms and norms of political relations, as they have known them to be, have now given way to the forms and norms of political relations prescribed by the constitution. It does not follow from the fact of India's enthusiasm for democracy that its populace also became concomitantly secularized: that people, *en masse*, came to think of the state, politics or democracy as separate from or opposed to religion, or to think of religion as a political contaminant. While political theorists have written a great deal about secularism in India,¹⁷ ethnographers find few traces of it.¹⁸ Empirical accounts

¹¹ Fuller, *Camphor Flame*.

¹² Piliavsky, *Introduction*.

¹³ For example, Mines, *Public Faces, Private Lives*; Mines, *Fierce Gods*; Piliavsky, *Introduction*; *Nobody's People*.

¹⁴ I have written about this at some length elsewhere (see Piliavsky, *Introduction*; *Nobody's People*).

¹⁵ For example, Price, “Kingly Models,” 562–63, *Kingship and Political Practice*; Singh, *Kingship in Northern India*, 21–37; Banerjee, *The Mortal God*.

¹⁶ There are notable exceptions: authors who have emphasized continuities with the independence and pre-colonial political forms and norms (e.g. Price, “Kingly Models”; Michelutti, *Vernacularisation of Democracy*; Bate, *Tamil Oratory*; Piliavsky, *Introduction*; Wouters, “Polythetic Democracy”; Banerjee, *The Mortal God*).

¹⁷ Tejani and Richman, *Crisis of Secularism*; Kaviraj, “Modernity and Politics.”

¹⁸ Hansen, *Saffron Wave*; Cannell, “Anthropology of Secularism.”

of political rallies and parties, of elections and political representatives are awash with this kind of religion, not only with gods and goddesses, with altars and icons and incense sticks, but crucially with the ritualized deference or devotionism of India's Little Tradition.¹⁹ And yet all this remains conspicuously under-theorized.

It is no doubt right that India's religious ideologies should be in focus of scholars' concerns, since they, more than anything, now threaten the country's fragile peace. And yet, by monopolizing our attention, India's religion as *political ideology* blocks from view religion as *political culture*: as a logic of political relations, a structure of mutual expectations, ideas about what political leaders and community should and should not be like. All this may be less news-worthy, but it is indispensable for grasping the logics of people's political judgments, decisions, and actions, for understanding the values and principles that steer people's political preferences, ways in which they appraise political parties and leaders, how they relate to politicians-elect, terms on which they press their demands and ways in which they express their grievances. It is also indispensable for understanding the social life of India's political ideologies, religious or otherwise: how and why they do or do not spread, the paths they take through society, and the social effects they have.

If nationalist refractions of India's Great Tradition are the explicit statements – the slogans – in the language of Indian politics, the Little Tradition is its grammar and syntax: less ostentatious (if no less audible to the naked ear), but no less consequential, not only for making sense of India's political institutions, relations, and norms, but also for recognizing major political currents.

One of the latter is the remarkable resistance of India's people to forces of religious nationalism. This may strike readers as a misguided, perhaps an insensitive, remark, given the incursions made recently by Hindu nationalism on the country's life. I do not wish to diminish its significance, but to point out that the fact that communalism has not managed to overwhelm India, to turn it into a totalitarian hell of the kind that ripped Europe apart in the twentieth century, remains extraordinary. Despite a number of large-scale pogroms and regular instances of small-scale violence, Indian society retains a relative communal peace. This "peace" is extraordinary given (1) the presence of a small, politically and economically vulnerable religious minority population (according to the 2011 census report, all non-Hindus combined make up only 20% of India's population, and tend to be poorer) alongside a large and rather clear-cut Hindu majority; (2) extensive illiteracy and an even more extensive lack of exposure to secular education; (3) the enormous political weight, density, and assertiveness of the Hindu right, which has nearly monopolized the rule of the country since Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014. One would expect all this to raise a tsunami of obliterating religious violence. And yet it has not. Across the country, Muslims and Christians still live side by side with Hindus in relative, fragile peace. Walk through an Indian city, town, or village and you will see for yourself. Sparks fail to set off flames: instances of communal violence remain isolated, even today.

Analysts of Indian politics have long insisted, or more often implied, that the guarantor of India's inclusive toleration is its secular state.²⁰ This is hardly surprising, given the

¹⁹For example, Brass, *Theft of an Idol*; Michelutti, *Vernacularisation of Democracy*; Bate, *Tamil Oratory*; Price and Ruud, *Power and Influence*; Banerjee, *Mortal God*; Sen and Nielsen, "Gods in the Public Sphere."

²⁰For example, Khilnani, *The Idea of India*; Smith, *India as a Secular State*.

view, to which analysts have been trained, of religion as political poison – a retrograde force of social divisions, bigotry, and intolerance. No doubt, India's secular legal framework prevents the formalization of religious violence, drawing a sharp line between India and Pakistan. But it cannot possibly account for the culture of relative tolerance that still prevails in the country. Not only has the state never separated from the non-existent "church" (however hard Hindu nationalists have worked to create a Hindu church that would become its state), Indian society never secularized (atheism remains fringe²¹). What is true of religion that prevails in most people's lives – the Little Tradition – is that it remains local, familial, pragmatic, and relational. Gods are powerful family members, neighbors who can help one live better lives. This religion is non-national, non-doctrinal, non-totalizing. However hard Hindu nationalists try to consolidate the myriad little gods into the few great ones, however many temples to Ram and statues of Hanuman they may erect, everyday Hinduism retains the centripetal force of its localizing pragmatism, remaining distant from doctrinaire totalizing, from universal, all-purpose beliefs – from turning, in other words, into an ideology. While scholars have commented extensively on this quality of India's Little Religious Tradition,²² its Little Political Tradition remains severely understudied and under-analyzed, leaving a vast vacuum of comprehension, not only of the structure and logic of Indian political relations, but of the centripetal counter-force to the relentlessly centrifugal religious ideologies that threaten India's social and political peace.

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Notes on contributor

Anastasia Piliavsky is a social anthropologist who has spent two decades of research in Rajasthan. She has written about banditry, patronage and democracy in India's social and political life. She is editor of *Patronage as Politics in South Asia* and author of *Nobody's People: Hierarchy as Hope in a Society of Thieves*. She teaches anthropology and politics at the India Institute of King's College London.

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²¹Copeman and Quack, "Godless People"; Binder, *Total Atheism*.

²²Redfield, "Social Organization of Tradition"; Marriott, *Village India*; Fuller, *Camphor Flame*.

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