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## UNIT 25 RELIGIOUS POLITICS

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### 25.1 INTRODUCTION

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The concept of *religious politics* has assumed a heightened significance in the contemporary India. Though religion and politics are considered as two distinct concepts, they have had a synthetic existence in the traditional society and continue to influence each other in the modern society as well. Together they have an immense potential to make a profound impact on each other. Religion plays an important role in influencing the social process of the humankind and vice-versa. It has been a significant factor in mass mobilisations not only during the national movements but also in the transitory phases towards modernity. In a democratic state like India, religion constitutes the core of the traditional society and continues to enjoy its influence on the mass psyche. This close affinity has also resulted in social disharmony and discord, often leading to clashes between different communities. The religious organisations interact with the political groups and try to maximise their support bases, claiming authority over a section of the population. The support of these religious groups often determines the strength of the political regimes. This unit provides an insight into the concept of the religious politics, and various dimensions associated with it like Hindu revivalism and Islamic perspective,

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### 25.2 MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS

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**Religious politics** can mean one of the **two** things. It is, first, a situation where religion itself becomes the basis of political articulation and of defining the purpose of politics. Here religion itself becomes a kind of politics, for example, reinterpretation of religious tradition for defining nationalism or for drawing a political programme of action. These can have many variations, as we shall see later in this unit. **Secondly**, **religious politics** is also, a condition where religion is used as the foundation for the political mobilisation of

the people. The institutions or festivals and such other things connected with religion become the basis of making political appeals to people. For example, the use of the temples and mosques or a religious festival like *Ganesh Puja* for the political mobilisation of the people is another form of religious politics. Both these types of religious politics have been quite common in our society. In fact, their history dates back to more than a hundred years but in the recent period, these have acquired the status of mainstream politics.

The concept **Religion and Politics** has a different reference. It refers to the problem of what ought to be the relation between the two, that is, between religion on the one hand and politics on the other. This, therefore, also involves the question of secularism and how one is oriented to it. If one accepts secularism, as the national movement did, then the question is how to and in what ways to keep politics autonomous or free from religion; it is also a question of developing a version of secularism appropriate to any given society, say the one like ours: Two concrete situations are never alike. In a situation like that of America with its proliferation of Protestant churches, secularism has to handle a different set of problems than in India where we have a multi-religious society. So the question as to how the religion and politics present themselves varies from society to society and from time to time.

In the first 30 years after Independence, the relation between politics and religion was of a different kind than it is now. Religion was of marginal importance for politics and politics was automatically free from religion. From the mid-1980's, it has drastically changed in a way that *Hindutva* as an ideology has become a dominant force in the society and politics and since 1998 in the government too. So the question of how to look at the relation between religion and politics in terms of the constitutional ideals has changed. Issues centred on secularism, civil rights, citizenship, democracy, etc. do not evoke the same response from the *Hindutva* as these came to mean in the course of the Freedom Struggle. Having made this distinction for the sake of clarity, we will only look at religious politics as defined above. As the distinction between politics and religion has collapsed in one form of nationalism and political appeals through religious symbols, we now have the preponderance of religious politics in the country.

### **25.2.1 Religious Politics: Divergent Views**

Religious politics, as we have seen, provides the substance and agenda of politics, that is, the content of politics itself is determined by one or another religion or the religious community. It can, therefore, appeal only to those belonging to that religious community. Religious politics cannot simultaneously be the politics of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. It can only belong to and may have appeal for the followers of one or the other religion. The politics that tries to defend what is taken to be Muslim identity or the politics that works towards creating a new and different identity for the Hindus, as is happening now, cannot obviously appeal to another community. This remains so even when it tries to present itself as nationalism, as *Hindutva* calls itself, "cultural nationalism". In essence it remains majoritarian religious politics. Religious politics, therefore, also remains communal politics or communalism, as it has been referred to in our country. This is so not just with India; it would be the same with the *Muttheda Quami Mahaz* in Pakistan or any other country for that matter.

Before we proceed further, one clarification is necessary here. A mere appeal to religion does not necessarily lead to religious politics. For example, one may be a Hindu but the version or the interpretation of Hinduism one subscribes to will determine the substance of politics. Let us take an example from our recent history. Gandhi and Savarkar both believed that religion should inform politics. But their versions of what it means to be a Hindu were so different that it gave rise to two very different conceptions of politics. Gandhi's view was that spiritual values should influence politics or otherwise politics will become impoverished. He took a very inclusive view of both religion and politics. He drew, of course, a great deal of his values from Hinduism but that did not exhaust his spiritual sources. Christianity and Islam and various deviant *bhakti* were an equally valid source for him. Politics was, for him, a coalition of emancipatory faiths. He, therefore, never used any religious festival or dogma for political mobilisation even though he drew a good bit of his vocabulary from Indian religious sources. In contrast to this, Savarkar thought that instead of spiritual values, it should be the race and ancestry, history and tradition, and the sacredness of the land of Hindus (*punia bhoomi*) which should be the basis of the Hindu view of politics. He also thought that only those whose religion has its origin in India can subscribe to this view of politics. Others like Muslims or Christians cannot ever commit their allegiance to India; in other words, these other people cannot treat India as their *Punia* Bhoomi. He gave the name of *Hindutva* to this *Hinduised* politics; all the main points of Savarkar's writings are available in the book of the same title. This is the prime example, its extreme, of religious politics. It is, obviously, an exclusionist politics, as defined earlier.

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### 25.3 EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS

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Religious politics in India has a long history and, in spite of being exclusionist, a rich pedigree. Some of the great religious thinkers with very wide horizons also contributed to the making of the religious politics even though they are not reducible to be the votaries of such a politics. The history of religious revivalism, which is the *via media* to the making of religious politics, is more than a hundred years old. Towards the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, politics based on revivalist sentiments was becoming ascendant all over the country, especially in Bengal and Maharashtra, which were, till then, the main centres of the social reform movements. This new mood of politics based on revivalism was fast replacing the social movements which sought to question certain practices within Hinduism like child marriages, enforced widowhood, denial of education to women, etc. It is interesting to note that most of the suggested reforms were related to the fate of the women, making life more livable for them. An instance of the ascendancy of revivalism and the decline of the reform movement was the treatment meted out to the National Social Conference started by Ranade, as an umbrella organisation of various social reform movements from different parts of India. Its aim was to discuss and co-ordinate and encourage the reform movement all over India. At an all-India level, it used to meet annually, parallel to the sessions of the Indian National Congress. In a drastic move, in the 1885 session of the Congress at Poona, Bal Gangadhar Tilak banned its meetings and tried to make it defunct. This change in Tilak's stance was caused because he had changed by now following the general tendency and took a clear position against social reforms. Soon after Tilak instituted the *sarvajanic* Ganesh Puja as a major mode of mass mobilisation against colonialism.

The second instance of changing mood among the literati in our society in defence of religion was the hugely vociferous, even though short lived, campaign against the 'Age of Consent Bill'. This bill proposed a simple measure that was to raise the age of marriage for girls from the then ten years to twelve years. Today we will be aghast if someone were to oppose this for whatever the reason. But the storm it raised then is surprising as we look back today. Notable figures and nationalists like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Bal Gangadhar Tilak and many others like them joined the chorus of protest. The argument was that the foreign rulers, the British, have no right to interfere in the religious customs of the Hindus. The argument sounds false because it was never made clear whether infant marriage of the girl was an internal feature of the Hindu custom or a mere social practice prevailing in the then Indian society. Contrast this with Gandhi's position when the British proposed a bill for the abolition of *Untouchability*. He consistently supported the British move between 1933 and 1935. On 27 January 1935, addressing some members of the Central Legislature, Gandhi said, "...even if the whole body of Hindu opinion were to be against the removal of *untouchability*, still he would advise a secular legislature like the Assembly not to tolerate that attitude." His view was that only undue interference in matters of religion ought to be avoided. But these same people who opposed the British on interfering in matters concerning religion, demanded the ban on cow slaughter. There was no consistency or uniformity of criteria in terms of which legislative measures proposed by the colonial government were to be opposed or demanded. The Hindu orthodox groups, which were becoming influential now, talked only in terms of Hindu religious sentiments.

Rising Hindu revivalism got support from unexpected quarters. Vivekananda, who had become enormously popular after his performance at the World Religious Parliament, was one of them. He gave an interesting argument based on reform vs. growth and service. He declared, "I do not believe in reform; I believe in growth. I do not dare to put myself in the position of God and dictate unto our society: 'This way you shall move and not that way.' ..... This wonderful national machine has worked through ages; this wonderful national river is flowing before us. Who knows and dare say whether it is good and how it shall move?" (In, "Traditions and Social Reform" reproduced as an Appendix in K.P.Karunakaran, *Religion and Political Awakening in India*, 1969 Revised Edition.) His considered view was that these social reform movements were elitist and alien to Indian tradition. Similar views were expressed in many other parts of India. In Bengal, among others, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, famous for his *Vande Matamm*, was a prominent voice against such reforms. In Maharashtra, it was Tilak who raised the banner of revolt against social reform. In other parts of India the theosophical movement took similar positions. What needs to be remembered is that these figures were very prominent nationalist voices and their effort was also to give a new and different shape to Indian nationalism.

The idea of going into all this is to show that though the rise of religious politics had its roots varying from region to region, it took a uniform position against another kind of politics which was predominant in the earlier phases starting with Rammohan Roy. The earlier politics was marked by the conviction that Indian society can revitalise itself by getting rid of evil practices which have got entrenched in the Hindu society, and that these cannot be removed without legislation and the sanction of the laws. *Religious politics establishes its claims in fighting the legacy of Rammohan Roy* It replaces that appeal by different ideas of the importance of Indian tradition and Hindu custom.

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## 25.4 HINDU REVIVALISM

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There is no common content to Hindu revivalism. It varied a great deal from both person to person and also region to region. We will look at the three regions in India where Hindu revivalism was pronounced in some form or other; Bengal, Maharashtra and Northern India, three regions where revivalism had a long run.

In Bengal, it was the most widespread as well as intense, but it took a singularly unusual form. It emerged in the form of a very, to borrow a term from Sumit Sarkar, "intellectualised revivalism". What it means is that it becomes a debate among the intellectuals of a highbrow, cerebral kind. It was a talk among the literati. Even when magazines and newspaper got into it, the tone and drift was such that it may have had little appeal to the common people. It had three major drives, among its prominent members like Bankim Chandra among many others, for example. First, highlighting and glorifying some immemorial traditions of India and arguing to establish their spiritual superiority to the west, even if we have to concede that we are materially weak. Second, in terms of these to ask, who (really) is an Indian? Everybody who lives in Bengal is not necessarily a Bengali. So too is the case with India. This way of treating who lives in India is territorial nationalism. One must also inhabit certain attributes and express certain sentiments, which may then qualify one to be an Indian. The word was not coined but it was the first step towards, what later came to be known as, cultural nationalism; that is, one is an Indian only when one displays certain cultural characteristics. Finally, immense intellectual labour went into showing the superiority of Lord Krishna to that of Jesus Christ; also momentarily an ideal for a patriotic Indian. But curiously, very little of what took place in Bengal survived in Bengal, (even if it is vibrant for other parts of India) except, perhaps, *Vande Mataram*, and only as a song without so much as a test of patriotism as in the north.

In Maharashtra, religious revivalism had a more varied basis. There surely was 'the intellectual component. And it took the form, subtly though, of a brahminical reassertion. This can best be seen in the efforts to counter the awakening and assertions among the lower castes as these crystallised in the person of Jyotiba Phule. There was also something different, secondly, from Bengal. Religious symbols and festivals were activated in the public arena, made *Sarvajanic*, to effect the mobilisation of the masses in the cause of nationalism. The most well known of these is the conversion of Ganesh puja, hitherto a domestic event, into a public celebration known as *Ganesh Utsav*. Today it has spread into many other parts of India, and become a source of communal tensions in the way it is utilised by the *Sangh Parivar*. Ganesh is the Lord of success and the activists of the *Parivar* think that by privileging Ganesh they will achieve political success all over India. This became and remains the route to mass mobilisation. The third form it took was the building of the cult of Shivaji Maharaj, unlike Krishna—a religious icon, a concrete historical figure and a great warrior. He was built up as the ideal Hindu personality, "always" fighting the Muslim rule. Shivaji was surely a figure of great importance in the regional awakenings taking place in India then and later but to build him as a Hindu cult figure was to communalise mass consciousness, which was getting mobilised then. In Maharashtra, religious revivalism took a turn towards mass mobilisation, and in this it was distinct from what had happened in Bengal.

Northern India represents a more intriguing picture. Much of the intellectual debates here spread into the society and became issues of popular contentions. And much of what became issues of contention were close to popular practices and beliefs. Two different variants emerged in north India. One in the Indo-Gangetic plains and the other in the northwestern India, what are now Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. In the Indo-Gangetic plain, the issues through which Hindu revivalism asserted itself were the ones related to cow-slaughter and Hindi in the Devnagri script. Gyan Pandey has shown in "Mobilizing the Hindu Community" and "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan" (both as Chapters.5&6 in his *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, 1990.*) Cow and its slaughter by the Muslims in daily life and especially on the occasion of the *Bakar-Id* became issues of heightening the sensibilities of Hindus and trying to mobilise them to agitate so as to stop the Muslims from slaughtering the cows. In the same vein the issue of Hindi and Devnagri as against Urdu in the Persian script became matters of Hindu- Muslim disputes within the public consciousness. In the northwestern India, similar issues were raised together with others through a different path. It was the rise and dissemination of the *Arya Samaj* movement of Swami Dayanand. At one level it was a "protestant movement" but at another it was also a vituperative attack against anything that was not properly aligned to *Vedas*. It successfully combined a sharp attack on many a Hindu practices like polytheism, idolatry, and caste based on birth and advocated inter-caste and widow remarriage and such other things. Dayanand in his famous book *Satyarth Prakash* also launched a vituperative attack on non-Vedic religions like Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc., devoting a chapter to each of these and the attack on Islam and its prophet was the most abusive. His followers then entered into unnecessary polemics with the Sikhs and the Muslims, the two other prominent religions of this region. Kenneth Jones in his book *Arya Dharma* shows how the movement rapidly spread in Punjab especially among the trading castes like the *Khatri*s. Prominent converts were Lala Lajpat Rai (the well-known nationalist leader), Lala Hans Raj, Lala Munshi Ram (later Swami Shradhanand) and many others. Since then, it concentrated on two activities in particular, opening of Anglo-Vedic schools and a campaign of *Shuddhi*—reconversion to Hindu dharm of those who had converted to other religions. This latter programme coupled with that among the Muslims called the *Tanzeem* and *Tableeg* was very instrumental in vitiating the communal atmosphere.

#### **25.4.1 Rise in Political Unrest**

The emerging political temper based on religious revivalism and cultural nationalism got a powerful intellectual reinforcement and moral legitimisation, on all all-India plane, from the writings of highly respected and sophisticated thinkers such as Vivekananda and Aurobindo. Their canvasses were vast, horizons very wide, and concern large. For both India has a mission for the world, to give to the materially oriented west the great spiritual resources of India and thus to enrich their impoverished civilisation. Within this mission they invoked the glories of ancient India, the immemorialness of Indian religion and philosophy, the superiority of *Vedanta*, the incomparable nature of Indian tolerance, and so on. All this can still go well. But there is a tendency to compare, especially pronounced in Vivekananda, the Hindu—Vedantic tradition with other religions. He was quite given to comparing the Hindu tolerance with Muslim "intolerance" and to equate Muhammadanism with slaughter all over the world, and to consider the prophet of Islam as having done more harm to the world than good. (Collected Works, Vol.1) Aurobindo

often equated Indian nationalism with Sanatan Dharma. In lesser hands, these and such other observations became very damaging for inter-community relations and in vitiating the worsening communal tensions. All this had disastrous consequences for India when seen in conjunction with what was happening with the Muslims.

The interpretative changes within the Hindu tradition discussed above had its parallel, though of a different kind, among the Muslims as well. The traditions within the Muslim religious community were also subjected to interventions and re-workings by both the neo-orthodoxy and the "modernist", both of them trying to draw the community away from the national developments for altogether different reasons. Whatever, these interventions succeeded in drawing the Muslim community apart.

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## 25.5 ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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The interventions among the Muslims, starting roughly from the first half of the 19th Century also did not have a uniform character to them. From the viewpoint of the Muslims in India, some of these represented a retreat into traditional or fundamentalist Islam of rather primitive varieties. Shah Waliullah or Sayyed Ahmad of Bareilly and their lesser known followers like Haji Shariatullah of Faraizis in Bengal or Maulvi of Faizabad or Maulvi Karamat Ali of Jaunpur, all in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were influenced by the Waliabi movement and concentrated their attention on the "Un-Islamic" practices prevalent among the Muslims like the folk practices of joining each others festivals, modes of salutations and greetings, common customs and etiquettes influenced by the surrounding Hindu ethos, and, above all, worship of saints as Shirk (associating other powers with Allah) and so on. They wanted to wean away the Muslims, especially the new converts, from residual Hindu practices and replace instead a purified form of Islam unadulterated by "foreign influences". Another form of intervention came later in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sir Ahmad Khan best represents this view. Instead of a retreat into the past and interpretations oriented to the times of Prophet Muhammad and his close associates, Sir Syed's vision was one of a Muslim community, staying away from the emerging struggle against the British colonialism, achieving rapid modernisation with a conception of Islam in consonance with reason and science and the demands of the modern era.

Whatever the differences may be, which can be discerned with respect to historical times, internal thrust and intentions or motivations, there are certain common features and consequences of these interventions from above. The more salient features are, first, a well thought-out and planned move towards addressing the people directly instead of relying on or looking to the court or the aristocracy to defend Islam, as, for example, the orthodoxy did in the conflict between Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh. Some set out to build bridges between the Muslim gentry and the lower ranks of Muslims to provide enduring channels of communication within the community. Secondly, these interventions sought to bring a shift from the site of theological arguments addressed to the learned for political appeals to some form of mobilisation of the people on broad themes. Thirdly, there was a consistent effort to reconstruct a "healthier" version of Islam as the ground on which the newly sought identity of Muslims could stand. It may not be wrong to see that these two trends came about due to these interventions as "Traditionalist" and "Modernist". Interestingly they took diametrically opposite stands towards the nationalist movement even while

looking at Muslims as a distinct cultural community. The traditionalists supported the national movement while the modernists pleaded with the Muslims to stay aloof from the independence movement.

The contradictory consequences involved in all this are worth noting. While these developments were slowly drawing the Muslim community away from the rest of the society, these were also slowly bringing them as a people into the public arena as active participants, insistent on being heard. The people were becoming active in the public arena, by distancing themselves from the Hindus. This was an important development. Though, this in itself was not a cause of partition, where political healing was still possible, but it did become a contributory factor.

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## 25.6 RELIGIOUS POLITICS: AN OVERVIEW

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Let us come back to course of religious politics among the Hindu communities delineated above. After the disaster of the partition, we are now in India where Hindus constitute 83 percent of the population. The next biggest religious group is that of the Muslims who make up about 11 per cent of the population. Developments among the Hindus therefore matter a lot more for the fate of India than among other religious communities. Of the many developments and interpretative changes discussed above, an insight into three or four consequences is needed to understand our present politics.

The first of these was to give monolithic unity to the Hindu community, a body of doctrines held together in a theological whole, quite in the way other religions are. Hinduism as a religion with fluid boundaries was seen as a liability in face of an adversity. There was also a concerted effort, secondly, to give muscle to Hinduism. All the religious thinkers in the wake of revivalism, with the sole exception of Gandhi, felt that Hinduism was weak and effeminate and therefore it was first conquered by Muslims and then colonised by the British. It must, therefore, be masculinised. Otherwise India will remain threatened by outside powers and internal enemy. This view united such diverse thinkers as Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati and many others. The unity and integrity of India was conceived in the unity and masculinity of the Hindus. Hindu history was, over the last thousand years since the coming of Muslims, viewed as a story of defeats and misfortune. Before that time was the period of great achievement, which was one of glory. It is the duty of every one, here is the third feature, which united every one of these thinkers, to recover that golden age. They differed only in their means of achieving it. Strategically they were one but tactically differed quite considerably.

The last important characteristic underlying the revivalist thought was a deep suspicion of those features of Hinduism, which to many other conscientious Hindus, like Gandhi or Tagore for example, were the beauty and strength of Hinduism. This had to do with its diversity and ability to generate innovative variety. No other religion had such a capacity. The above thinkers and the movements, we have considered earlier, had deep mistrust about this trait of Hinduism. They were therefore distrustful of local differences, regional variations, mystic cults or the *Bhakti* movements. These were looked at as enfeebling and therefore to be shunned and fought out. This reached its culmination in Savarkar's *Hindutva* (the most important book *Sangh Parivar*, written in 1923) where doctrine itself is suspect



and is replaced by race, blood and the shared history of this sacred land—*Punia Bhoomi*. The perception was that those outside of sharing this blood and tradition, like Muslim and Christian with religions from alien soil, can never be able to ever give full allegiance to India; they can never treat India as their *Punia Bhoomi*. Muslims thus are a suspect presence in India. It, therefore, follows that to be a good Hindu, one should combat the Muslims and also the Christian. The question then to ponder over is: is cultural nationalism not communal?

What Hindutva does is to counter the *direct identity of the Hindus* with the *negative similarity of the minorities*. We now have the Hindu *Self* standing in the perpetual conflicting presence of the *Other*. It is only in getting the better of the *Other* that the *Self* can realise its potential. That is what religious politics culminates in. This is what Hindutva is all about.

All this is still in the realm of imagination, the world of thought. How does one make it actual, the politics of the day? What stands between the imagined and the real is the organisation, so thought Hegdewar—the founder of the *Rashtriya SwayamSevak Sangh* (RSS). Hegdewar, in Nagpur, founded the RSS in 1925, two years after the publication of *Hindutva* by V.D. Savarkar. Many attempts to build organisations were made from the beginning of this century. The earliest were prntinidhi *sabhas* of the Arya Samaj which itself was founded in 1875. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Hindu Sabha was founded. Later on in the 1915 the Hindu Maha Sabha was formed. The efforts were always there but nothing succeeded in a big way.

The RSS was a modest beginning, in a provincial town of Maharashtra, where it still has its headquarters. It was unique and innovative in a simple way. Its *organisational* principle was based on three things. There was to be a uniform (a knicker and shirt), a salute (to the RSS, but not national, flag) and a drill (with lathis) to give a martial outlook. This was to be followed by chat with a *swayam sevak*, on matters considered by him to be "patriotic". But the important idea underlying this was that it must become a part of the routine of one's life, The ordinary cadre, the *Sevak*, is a soldier in the cause of the nation. Like in military, he is bound by discipline, in strictly hierarchical set up. Though it seemed to be farcical in the beginning, it achieved considerable success under its second dictator, Golwalkar. It has number of affiliates like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the *Bajrang Dal*, *Durga Bahini*, *Hindu and Mannini*. The RSS started a political party of its own, having earlier collaborated with Hindu *Mahasabha* for many years, the *Jana Sangh*. It was reincarnated as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980, which is now in a coalition called National Democratic Front, the ruling party in the country.

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## 25.7 SUMMARY

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In this unit, you have studied the meaning and importance of religious politics, and its divergent views. It has gradually evolved since the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the national movement as its background. The beginning was made with social reforms and subsequently found support from scholars and nationalists alike, though their methods differed significantly. Hindu revivalism secured its bases in Bengal, Maharashtra and the Northern Indian region. The nationalist leaders drew their inspiration from religious icons and cults and Vedas; they tried to heighten the sensibilities of their groups by advocating the reforms and rituals related to their respective faiths. The Islamic perspective drew its sources from the historic past and

attempted to unite the community by constructing a healthier version of Islam. Gradually the differences led to conflicting perspectives; nevertheless, the religious groups have started assuming a prominent role, thus making the issue of religious politics a continuous phenomenon.

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## **25.8 EXERCISES**

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- 1) How is religious politics different from the issue of religion and politics?
- 2) Explicate the essence of religious politics.
- 3) Discuss the evolution of religious politics.
- 4) What do you understand by Hindu Revivalism?
- 6) Write a note on the Islamic perspective of religious politics.