Hindu nationalism, diaspora politics and nation-building in India

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This article proceeds from a critical reading of the role of religion for nation-building in India. In particular, the authors discuss how the Indian notion of secularism relies upon a number of religious legacies manifest in a Gandhian notion of what constitutes religious and political communities. Proceeding from this general picture, the authors examine how Hindu nationalists have used such legacies to enforce exclusionary practices by establishing certain hegemonic structures of rigid religious boundaries and practices with the aim of maintaining antagonistic movements within the Hindu fold. This, the authors argue, has been the case both among Hindu nationalists in India and among the widespread diaspora in Europe, Canada and the United States. Here, the authors critically evaluate a number of attempts to challenge these hegemonic structures in terms of secular and religious forces as well in terms of legalistic understandings of citizenship rights. It is argued that religion can and has played a positive role in Indian nation-building, but that Hindu nationalism has continuously reproduced exclusionary practices against other religious communities and worked against any forms of assimilatory processes.

Introduction

In May 2009, for a second consecutive election, the Hindu right—with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; Indian People’s Party) at its helm—suffered an unanticipated defeat. The Congress-dominated coalition, United Progressive Alliance (UPA), secured an exceptional victory, with the Congress Party alone winning 206 seats, while the BJP managed to secure a mere 116 (Ramakrishnan 2009).

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Does the election result signal the end of the sway of Hindu nationalist conceptions of Indian society and the state, or is it more accurate to perceive it as a temporary electoral backlash? Should the results be interpreted as a shift away from a seeming inseparability between community, religion and politics in the context of Indian nation-building? Will it impel the BJP to cast aside the party’s link with organisations emphatically promoting India as a primarily Hindu nation?

Answering the initial question with Ram Puniyani (2009), we would contend that a general impression and sentiment of abatement has arisen, even if the BJP remains a well-established governing party in a number of states. The party’s top leadership has shown signs of dissension in the wake of the 2009 elections, most noticeably in the decision of its vice-president, Yashwant Sinha, to relinquish his position (Vyas 2009a). Still, the party remains firmly associated with the Hindu nationalist movement and its core ideas. In a resolution adopted on 21 June 2009, for instance, it was stated that the underpinning ideology, Hindutva, ‘is not to be understood or construed [as] narrowly confined to religious practices or expressed in extreme forms. It is related to the culture and ethos of the people ... a way of life ... and, therefore, inclusive’ (cited in Vyas 2009b).

The religious nationalism emanating out of the activities of the Hindu right is undoubtedly a core constitutive part of nation-building in India. Does it, however, meet the conditions of being accommodative, of being a benign and favourable fundamant for nation-building? We know of the tragic upheavals caused by its more violent manifestations, as was the case in, for example, Mumbai in 1992–3, Gujarat in 2002 and Orissa in 2008. Still, it does, somewhat contradictorily, contribute to the demarcation and cohesion of being Indian. It does so by appealing to the mythical unity of the Hindu community, invoking an ahistorical version of a glorious Hindu past and providing an imagined Hindu national identity.

In this article, we are interested in how Hindu nationalism has shaped or failed to shape conceptions of national identity in India. In particular, we are concerned with the role of religious nationalism as a facilitator of or an obstacle to state-anchored national identity as outlined in the introduction to this special issue. India is often conceived of as a deeply religious society, but one in which secularism has been allowed to frame the parameters of politics and state-building. It is thus of interest to show how Hindu nationalism has affected Indian notions of secularism. In the following section, we discuss some of the theoretical points of departure with regard to national identity and religious nationalism, followed by a general account of nation-building in India and the emergence of the Hindu right. We then proceed to a discussion of how the concept of Hindutva has been used to construct religious boundaries around national identity at home and abroad. Of importance is how such constructions have been challenged in religious, secular and legalistic terms. We argue that religion can and has played a positive role in Indian nation-building, but that
Hindu nationalism has continuously reproduced exclusionary practices against other religious communities and has hampered most forms of assimilatory processes beyond and within the so-called Hindu ‘fold’.

**Religious nationalism and nation-building in India**

In the introduction to this special issue, Michael Barr indicates that one objective of our present engagement with religious nationalism is to grasp its success or failure in terms of particular national identity constructions. Hence, our engagements with religious nationalism should expound both its violent manifestations and its role in the (re)production of cohesive and stable societies. Rather than emphasising the divisive and potentially destructive functions of religious nationalism, we ought to note its tendencies towards ‘hegemony’ and ‘assimilation’. It is a hegemony wherein—in Barr’s terminology—elites are ‘using, or trying to use, its political and social power to establish [certain] mores and values as the dominant cultural and social force in the country’, while ‘trying to build a state-anchored national identity in essentially religious-nationalist terms’. An important aspect of the realisation of such hegemony seems to be the assimilation—whether in the ‘hegemonic group itself’ or, as is often the case with minority groups, in a ‘subordinate’ position—into ‘the broader state-anchored national community’. Of particular interest here is the extent to which the Hindu right has interacted with other hegemonic interpretations of what constitutes Indian national identity and the extent to which such identity constructions have relied upon assimilatory or exclusionary practices with regard to non-Hindu minorities.

India became one of the first British colonies to attain independence and its political establishment was determined to make democracy work in a multi-religious, multilingual and multi-ethnic region that had not previously been united. India’s ‘independence’ simultaneously meant a partitioning of British India according to the logic of the so-called two-nation theory, as well as the integration of numerous princely states that had previously been left outside of the colonial state’s institutional arrangements. The partition of British India into two independent states—India and Pakistan—generated both large-scale communal violence and extensive migration in the immediate wake of independence. It also set the conditions for a long-standing antagonism between the two neighbouring states.

It was one of the great achievements of Indian independence in 1947 that, despite the partition and the horrendous acts that accompanied it (for a commendable analysis, see Pandey 2001), secularism was accepted and enshrined as a basic value in the Constitution. Although the Constitution sought to enact and promote an inclusive nationalism, it departed from a number of Gandhian notions about what independent India should be(come). In Gandhian visions of the future political system of India, the state and government were to
be kept minimal and power decentralised to village *panchayats* (institutions of local self-government). The opposite took place, however: centralisation and policing of unity and cohesion transpired as key concerns. A number of things advocated by Gandhi never materialised, such as the call for the dissolution of political parties, including the Congress (Austin 2000: 27–32), as well as Gandhian notions and practices in the area of political mobilisation. B.R. Ambedkar—the most prominent political representative of the Dalits in the late 1940s—proclaimed, for instance, in 1949 that ‘we must abandon the method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and *satyagraha* [non-violent resistance]’ as ‘these methods’ amounted to ‘nothing but the grammar of anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us’ (Constituent Assembly Debates [Proceedings]). Hence, we witness a seeming departure from Gandhian conceptions of ‘India’ in terms of power, legitimate political activity and sanctioned forms of statehood in the wake of independence.

Once the worst manifestations of the partition violence had abated, the Constitution had been promulgated and the first general elections had been successfully carried out in 1951–2, a period of seeming concord and harmonious coexistence emerged. Unfortunately, tension between different groups had increased already by the late 1950s, followed by a growing number of communal riots. Conflicts between Hindus and Muslims intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, and a number of secessionist tendencies emerged in various places, such as in the Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. There was also an increase in conflicts between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ castes as political leaders adopted ‘reservation’ policies to gain electoral support from the (more numerous) ‘lower’ castes (for details, see Brass 2003; Dutt 1998; Kohli 1990).

As political consciousness has been rising among marginalised groups, religion and nationalism have become effective means of communication and protest as they divert attention away from class and caste struggle and asymmetrical power relations. In this sense, they have been instrumental in the search for a secure Hindu identity in the light of global change and modernity.

**Constructing national identity: India at independence**

Here, it is worth contrasting the Hindu right’s recent rise to prominence and legitimacy with developments at the time of India’s independence in August 1947. At this time, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS; Association of National Volunteers)—the fountainhead of the Hindu nationalist movement—was deemed peripheral to any legitimate forms of political mobilisation and organisation. This was largely due to the involvement of some of its sympathisers in the murder of Mahatma Gandhi and its opposition to the emerging post-colonial state. Even if certain sections of the Congress were sympathetic to selected notions of Hindu supremacy, clear divergences between
the mainstream of the anti-colonial movement and Hindu ‘communalists’—for example, the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha—existed. As noted by Kumkum Sangari when discussing Gandhi’s views on religion and nationality:

In his constant reiteration that religion was ‘private’ and an [sic] ‘entirely a personal matter’ Gandhi partly meant that religion comprised...an unmediated relation of each person to god, fell outside the purview of the state and was certainly not an entity that could determine nationality (Sangari 2002: 5; citations from Harijan 27 July 1947).

At the same time, Gandhi realised the difficulties in disassociating religion from politics and argued in his autobiography that: ‘I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means’ (quoted in Chandhoke 1999: 44).

This statement still seems to ring true in South Asian politics. Some scholars even argue that ‘[r]eligion has emerged as a key analytical category for interpreting South Asian politics’ (Hirst and Zavos 2005: 3). Mark Juergensmeyer (1996: 129) wrote that ‘[w]hat Hindutva is and how it is related to international patterns are not just academic questions. They are of practical, political importance, because in India religious nationalism is still a potent force.’ The same is valid today. The influence of the Hindu right does not only affect internal social and identitarian boundary-drawing, but also India’s relation to its neighbours, to institutions and practices of global governance, and to the Indian diaspora. To exile it to the margins of international relations would thus be erroneous. In order to give religious nationalism in India its deserved attention, the core queries of the analysis are: why is religious nationalism time and again assuming a primary function, and what are its exclusionary and potentially assimilatory and accommodating dynamics?

In the body of literature on the Hindu right, an array of objectives has been ascribed to the movement. Sumit Sarkar (2005: 305), for example, has depicted its ambition as an attempt to mould ‘Indian secular democracy into a majoritarian Hindu state which represses all religious and other dissent’—an objective that its political wing, the BJP, occasionally tries to free itself from. Although the Congress, in contrast to the BJP, represents continuity, stability and inclusiveness stemming from the legacy of the nationalist movement, it is a heritage that has been increasingly indicted for its corrugated ‘secularism’—both by champions of a secular state and by advocates of religious nationalism. It is, on the one hand, asserted that the Gandhian strain of nationalist thought carried with it connotations drawn from practices and imageries integral to Hinduism. On the other hand, the tendency of the Congress since the 1980s to, at times, employ a language tinted by appeals to religious identities has raised questions of its commitment to secularism. It is analogously claimed that the Constituent Assembly, which functioned between December 1946 and January 1950, upheld a view of India and
Indian citizenship as defined by its leaning towards the ‘majority’ identity: one example being the decision to make the word Bharat (‘Indian’ nation) part of the initial paragraph of the Constitution (Singh 2005: 911), another the repeated articulation of a vague yet clearly delimited ‘we’, and a third the recurring references to the Hindu pantheon and mythology in the debates.

It is true that the Congress-dominated state tried to expunge communalism and the religious, if understood as equivalent to the traditional, in the wake of independence. It did so by stressing rationality, modernisation and industry-led development. However, even if the elite discourse ascribed no future ‘place’ for religion—progress would ‘free’ India from the burden of the traditional and of inertia—the sacred remained a constitutive element of the secular. Even prior to the advent of the mounting political influence of the Hindu right, the state played an active role in the production and reproduction of categorisations along religious lines.

Here, it is worth drawing attention to the oscillation surrounding the issue of minorities and their position vis-à-vis the state following independence. One such example involved the permit and passport system for persons crossing the Indo-Pakistan border—wherein a palpable distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims was eventually made (see Zamindar 2007). Another included the vacillation of the Constituent Assembly on the subject of political safeguards for religious minorities (Bajpai 2000). Even though the Assembly had made such special considerations part of the draft introduced in 1948, the final version of the Constitution included no political safeguards for religious minorities. This exclusion of religious minorities from preferential treatment cannot be understood without considering the ways in which secularism as a principle has informed religious nationalism in post-independence India.

Religion and secularism: ‘disowned doubles’?

India adopted secularism and constitutionalised religious rights to overcome the faith-induced antagonisms of the pre-independence period and during the partition. However, the leaders of newly independent India opted for a type of secularism that implied continued state involvement in religious affairs. Rather than separating church and state, India opted for the principle of sarva dharma samabhava—‘equal respect for all religions’. As a principle, it has required government intervention in religious affairs and support of religious activities so that all Indians have an equal opportunity to practise their religions (Bhargava 1996; Kolodner 1995). Thus, Indian national leaders claim secular credentials by visiting places of worship of all religious denominations and the broadcast media allot time equally to the prayers of different religions.

At the time of independence, the leaders of the Congress did not see a contradiction in professing an Indian nation that rested on Hindu religious tradition, as this tradition was viewed as tolerant and as based on indigenous
religious pluralism (Deol 2000: 40). This choice of intertwining religion and politics was influenced by independence leaders such as Gandhi, who often employed a discourse that resembled the Hindu notion of dharmic obligation. His continued reference to ‘Mother India’ invoked characteristics of Hindu religious worship and, despite the fact that he was a champion of Hindu–Muslim unity, his calls for religious tolerance and universalism were often based on Hindu beliefs and practices.

It was, in part, this ‘inclusive’ Hindu tolerance that alienated the Muslim League and was at the heart of the two-nation theory professed by M.A. Jinnah. This theory, which culminated in the establishment of Pakistan, suggested that Muslims and Hindus were separate nations, offering Muslims and Hindus a nationality associated with a socio-religious community. The Indian concept of secularism can thus be viewed as an idealisation and romanticisation of Western nineteenth-century universalist ideas, integrated into an elite political culture. As argued by K.N. Panikkar (1997: 18–9), this is precisely the weakness of the Indian notion of secularism, as it keeps religion in play and enhances religiosity by preserving and projecting religious identities (see also Deol 2000; Kolodner 1995). This, it is argued, has increased the social distance between religious communities.

For a more contemporary reflection on the relation between communal belonging and secularism, Ashis Nandy (1998: 283) questions the extent to which we should approach ‘communalism and secularism as sworn enemies’ or if it is more appropriate to consider them ‘as the disowned doubles of each other’. In other words, the notion of a double, co-constitutive rejection is preferable to an understanding of the two terms as dichotomous. Hence, religion in India is a ‘powerful, constitutive, and perhaps a definitive component of culture’ (Chandhoke 1999: 25). In this sense, modernity has not been able to destroy religious belief systems in India, despite the expectations of some modernist theoreticians. If secularism is interpreted as the opposite of religion, it is only likely to benefit Hindu majoritarian nationalism. As Neera Chandhoke has argued:

> if secularism can be interpreted in such a way that it serves to erase the ‘presence of religious or ethnic particularism from the domain of law and public life’, and if it contributes to the construction of a homogenised citizenship, downgrading minority cultures in the process, there is urgent need to shift ground (Chandhoke 1999: 94).

Hence, if we adhere to a purely legalistic definition of secularism as equality, we fail to see how some groups are able to reproduce inequalities in which weaker groups find it hard to use their constitutional rights.

**The emergence of the Hindu right**

The emergence of the Hindu right must be viewed in this light. Hence, Hindu nationalism has consistently played into a hegemonic majority narrative in
which Hindu values are said to be submerged into a ‘false’ equality as the state is constantly ‘appeasing’ the Muslim minority. As mentioned above, Hindu nationalism experienced an upsurge in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the BJP being asked to form a minority government in 1998 and another (albeit stronger) one in 1999. Hindu nationalism as a political project is not a new phenomenon, however. The present organisational framework assumed its initial shape when the RSS was established in 1925 (for analyses of the evolution of the RSS, see Bhatt and Mukta 2000; Blom Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996). The RSS later developed its political wing—the Jana Sangh (People’s Society)—which in 1977 became part of the Janata Party (People’s Party) that came to power after Indira Gandhi’s emergency rule. In 1980, the Jana Sangh left the Janata Party and formed the BJP as the political arm of the RSS. The BJP has close ties with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP; World Council of Hindus)—a non-governmental organisation that was formed in 1964 to spread ‘Hindu ethical spiritual values’ (Kolodner 1995: 234) and to establish links with Hindus in other countries. The VHP attained national notoriety in the early 1980s when it organised an anti-Muslim campaign following the conversion of over 1000 Dalits to Islam (see Kolodner 1995; Patnak and Chalam 1998: 271). This organisation instigated the fear that other lower-caste citizens would follow suit, and that ‘Gulf money’ was being used to carry out these conversions and to undermine the Hindu nation (Kolodner 1995). The ‘family’ of organisations created by the RSS is often referred to as the Sangh Parivar (Family of Associations).

The exclusive nationalism involved in the creation of the RSS was influenced by Western examples. This is particularly apparent in the writings of V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar. Savarkar’s work Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?, published in 1923, is a core text for nationalist ‘Hinduness’, and rests on the assumption that the Aryans who settled in India constituted a nation now embodied in the Hindus (Jaffrelot 1996). But it was Golwalkar who, in 1939, gave the RSS the ideological authority it had previously lacked. In his book We, or Our Nationhood Defined, he claimed that Western countries had successfully fostered and nurtured a ‘correct national consciousness’—different from the territorial nationalism guiding Indian nation-building (Golwalkar 1939: 62, quoted in Jaffrelot 1996: 52). In this, Golwalkar drew on a number of German writers, who inspired him to look at Indian national identity in terms of geographical unity, race, religion, culture and language. The racial factor was by far the most important, and the Muslim minority, he argued, posed the most severe threat by being a ‘foreign body’ lodged into the Hindu society, thus undermining the Hindu nation (quoted in Jaffrelot 1996: 55; see also Chakravartty 1994; Patnaik and Chalam 1998; for detailed accounts of the rise of Hindu nationalism, see also Bhatt 2001; Bidwai et al. 1996; Blom Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996; van der Veer 1996).

As can be seen from this brief outline, Hindu nationalism possesses relatively deep roots. Over the last decades, however, the movement has assumed
increased significance. The mobilisation for the construction of a temple at the alleged birthplace of the Hindu god Ram in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh has been central to its rising influence. At first, the propelling of the matter onto the national stage revolved around the existence of a mosque, the Babri Masjid, on the Ayodhya site. The mosque was demolished by Hindu right sympathisers in December 1992. Since then, agitation on the subject has been linked to the construction of a temple (see Chatterjee 1996; Desai 2002; Dutta and Sarkar 1994; Ludden 1996). The demolition of the Babri Masjid had symbolic as well as literal repercussions throughout India—most visibly in the communal violence that erupted in Mumbai between December 1992 and late January 1993 (see Sabrang Communications and Publishing 1998).

**National identity and the construction of religious boundaries**

Over the last eight years, two entwined and co-constitutive global trends have been present in the Indian context. One is the unfolding tension of a ‘war on terror’, while the other refers to a more long-standing socio-economic and political marginalisation of Muslims. The latter has been poignantly demonstrated in the *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: A Report*—often referred to as the Sachar report (Prime Minister’s High Level Committee 2006). The report exposes the deplorable socio-economic conditions of a large number of Muslims and the increasing ghettoisation of Indian cities. It also discusses how violence against Muslims has increased the physical and psychological distance between Hindu and Muslim communities.

As we know, violence tends to mark out, reproduce and reify boundary-drawing. The use of violence is often connected to myths about the origin of the nation, in which historical narratives play an important part. The (re)construction of historical narratives and myths is a contested process and concerns both a struggle for the control over cultural space as well as the articulation of political needs for a particular identity group in the present. Hence, a ‘nostalgic’ past based on collective memories, myths and tradition generates both legitimacy and possibilities for mobilisation. Even though these cultural attributes are constantly negotiated, contested and reconstructed over time, identity groups are inclined to adopt various myths of homogeneity and essentialism. As a result, this ‘everyday primordialism’ is framed as something you are born into and identity appears as a static and natural category (Fearon and Latin 2000; Hutchinson 1994).

The linkage and continuity between past and present is particularly important. Efforts are often made by hegemonic interpreters to trace the genealogy of an identity group back to a specific place, time and ancestor in order to derive an ideological lineage. Religion, in particular, serves as a powerful source. The sites of religious revelations are turned into national
shrines; religious miracles become national feasts; and holy scriptures are reinterpreted as national epics (Smith 2000: 806). In the case of India, Hindu nationalism has needed to demonstrate that the nation it wishes to create has always existed. This nationalist narrative is deeply rooted in religious discourse, which relates the present to a glorified past. As a consequence, the Hindu right has acted as a forceful catalyst in the elevation of religion into a primary (national) identity marker.

The Hindutva movement in India: establishing religious boundaries

It is in relation to such claims that Ashis Nandy has insisted on making a clear distinction between the Hindutva type of political ideology and Hinduism, where the latter is regarded as a ‘faith and a way of life’ that permeates Indian culture (quoted in Jaffrelot 1996: 133). Hindutva, in comparison, has become an attempt to close Hinduism off in, what Hent de Vries (2002: 1) would label, a ‘conceptual totality’, thereby relying on a violent manoeuvre to overcome the particular and to mask the discrepancy between its notions of ‘Hinduness’ (and Hindu ‘culture’) and Hinduism as a religion. The Hindu right has attempted to make Hindus into a ‘community’ or ‘fold’ devoid of internal differentiations. The key imagery in such delimitation is the portrayal of Hindus as always already belonging to and constituting a singular community. The Hinduism and the Hindu community projected by the Hindu right are, thus, monolithic and unified, ancient and endless. Another crucial element of the disseminated narrative is that the expanse of Hinduism—and thus of Hindus—corresponds to the very ambit of Indian society (Oza 2007: 153). The vast network of Hindu nationalist organisations is a vital component in the establishment and promotion of a sense of cohesion and immanence. The primary effect of this has been the cementing of primordial articulations of identity and the pitting of these against each other.

Such primordialisation has relied upon the projection of some common myths or themes onto the ‘other’, in this case Muslims. For instance, in response to the Muslim League’s insistence on a separate nation state, Muslims are depicted as being responsible for the partition of the ‘sacred’ Hindu homeland in 1947. Although Muslims (today) constitute only 14 percent of the population, India is the second largest Muslim country in the world—counting over 130 million people. This number has been hailed by Hindu nationalists as a threat to the Hindu majority as Muslims often tend to act as a vote bank (Kolodner 1995; Oommen 1994; Patnaik and Chalam 1998). In the construction of the Muslim ‘other’, Muslims are recurrently referred to as not truly Indian and as potential collaborators with neighbouring states and transnational Islamist groups. In addition, pointing to Indian Muslims’ refusal to have a common civil code, Hindu nationalists argue that Muslims are creating a separate national identity that prevents them from integrating into Indian society.
This preoccupation with the Muslim ‘other’ has tended to define most interpretations of Hindu nationalism. However, Hindu nationalism has also been portrayed in more fundamentalist terms as a religious, conservative and traditional movement. In opposition to such depictions, Aparna Devare (2009: 157) describes it as a ‘modern phenomenon’ since it displays a visible dependence on ideas conventionally considered integral to modernity, such as ‘nation, state, science, rationality, notions of femininity/masculinity, and history’. This can be related to Peter van der Veer’s (1996: 66–7) argument that the essentialisation of Hindus and Muslims must be understood in a larger historical context, where the discourse on ‘Hindu spirituality’ and ‘Hindu tolerance’ has a specific history. The ideal of religious tolerance in the West, he says, derives from a universalisation of religion that is part of a Western discourse of modernity and modern ‘nation states’. This discourse has consequences for Muslim and Hindu populations incorporated into the modern world system. Being the old rivals of the Christian West, Muslims are labelled ‘fanatic’ and ‘bigoted’, while Hindus are seen in a more positive light as being ‘tolerant’. Devare (2009: 159) develops the argument to its logical extension while claiming that the Hindu right version of Hinduism is most appropriately described as a strategic utilisation and a secularising of religion, leaving ‘little room for the sacral, spiritual, or transcendental’.

In this sense, a number of authors have argued that Hindu nationalism is not a religious movement and that there are a number of factors that would impede any unified Hindu movement. Hindu religion, for instance, does not easily lend itself to organised movement in the way that Islam or Christianity may be able to do. As pointed out by Kolodner (1995) and others (see Panikkar 1997; van der Veer 1996), there is no recognised clergy, central church or dogma that all Hindus must follow. Neither is there any one single text that has been claimed to have divine authority, making Hindu fundamentalism a seeming contradiction as there are so few (agreed-upon) fundamentals. Second, it has been shown that the term ‘Hindu’ has not always permeated the identities of many Indians. Paradoxically, it means that what is probably the most fundamental aspect of traditional Hindu society—caste—may present the largest obstacle to the creation of a homogenous Hindu nation (Kolodner 1995). These obstacles have made it necessary to define the ‘other’ in essentialised terms as only then can a hegemonic national identity be created. Such tendencies go far beyond the Indian context and have affected Indians living abroad as well as foreign relations more generally.

**Hindu nationalism at home and abroad**

Hindutva ideology and organisations have become increasingly visible in many South Asian diaspora communities since the early 1990s (see Bhatt 2000; Brown 2006; Rajagopal 2000; Vertovec 2000). The growing importance of
diaspora politics can only be understood with regard to an increasingly
globalised world where borders have grown more porous and fuzzy. Hence,
diasporas challenge traditional conceptions of territoriality and ingrained ideas
of what is inside and outside a state. As Sean Carter (2005: 60–1) notes: ‘given
the increased capacity for diasporas to “act at a distance” ... we need to
reconsider the ways that we think about the nation and its territorialities, as
well as diaspora and its territorialities’. Most diaspora studies focus on the
existence of a homeland and have predominantly been used to refer to ‘classical’
diaspora groups, such as the Jewish, Greek and Armenian exile communities
(Brubaker 2005). The Hindu diaspora fits this generalised picture due to its
continued emphasis on India’s sacred geography. India as a sacred space that
abounds with sacred places has created a ‘sentimental respect if not spiritual
reverence for that place and its civilizational heritage remains exceptionally
strong’ (Vertovec 2000: 4). However, the Hindu diaspora also challenges
traditional accounts of ‘long-distance nationalism’, in Benedict Anderson’s
(1983) terminology. Hence, the focus is not only on how diasporas attempt to
change politics in the homeland, but also on how nationalist organisations
operating in the homeland attempt to mobilise Hindus abroad (Jaffrelot and
Therwath 2007).

The RSS, for instance, has established itself in some 150 countries, including
60 shakhas (‘branches’) in the United Kingdom, while the VHP has become the
central organisation claiming to represent the entire Hindu world and a
Hindutva world view. The VHP has 12 branches in the United Kingdom, 25
chapters in the USA, 2 in Canada, branches in 6 other European countries and
numerous others in non-Western countries. Most of these are affiliated with
Vishwa Hindu Parishad International (VHPI) (Bhatt 2000; Brown 2006; Mukta
2000). The RSS’s main concern has been the loss of Hindu identity as a result of
Western materialism, immorality and corruption, while the overwhelming
problem for the VHP has been the historical victimisation of the global Hindu
community (Bhatt 2000; Mukta 2000). The RSS has not only especially pointed
to the vulnerability of children and adolescents with regard to Western values,
but also in relation to other minority communities in the West. Hence, in the
United Kingdom, for instance, the religious boundaries between Hinduism and
Islam have largely worked as class relations and have come to stand for
differences in material wealth between the partial economic success of the East
African Asian merchant communities and the rather impoverished Pakistani,
Bangladeshi and Caribbean communities (Bhatt 2000).

In the USA, religious relations have functioned less as class relations than in the
United Kingdom, which is related to the fact that the US Indian diaspora
constitutes one of the highest-paid minority communities (Rajagopal 2000).
However, there are many similarities in the way different minority groups have
pressured the state for power. First, many Indian migrants have been engaged in
a ‘long-distance nationalism’. This has involved fund-raising and charity for the
benefit of the homeland, much of which has been collected by the Hindu
right—often without the donors’ knowledge. Second, we see a reinvention of (Hindu) tradition and culture as a means to resist an ‘ahistorical American culture’ in which rebellion, sexual freedom and love marriages are encouraged. Both the Hindu Student Council (HSC) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) take advantage of parental fears of Westernisation and encourage parents to send their youth to events organised by the Hindu right. Third, and finally, the racism experienced among many young South Asians has led to the search for secure identities in the reconstruction of their dignity. Here, the Hindu minority is frequently heralded as a ‘model community’ based on an ancient (and romanticised) past (Mathew and Prashad 2000; see also Brown 2006; Rajagopal 2000).

Despite differences between the USA and the United Kingdom, the move among both diaspora communities is towards fixity and rigidity in the boundaries of Hindu identity (Brown 2006; Raj 2000). The global economy has affected Indian elites at home and abroad, and has placed these people in important positions of power that can be (and have been) used to channel their material, cultural and political interests. In India, as argued earlier, these elites have repeatedly launched attacks on the ‘appeasement’ of religious minorities by political leaders (especially the Congress), using the language of ‘victimisation’ of the majority community. This feeling of victimisation has seemed to ring true for many Hindus in the West struggling with their minority status and discrimination (Mukta 2000). In this sense, the diaspora Hindutva movement is simultaneously concerned with ‘minority Hindu rights’ in the West and ‘majority rights of Hindus’ in India (Bhatt and Mukta 2000; Brown 2006). In both cases, this concern tends to be interpreted through a nationalist lens focused on enhancing hegemonic interpretations of what constitutes Hindu national identity.

Here, it is pertinent to consider the issue of foreign relations more generally since the impact of the Hindu right has become of central concern to international relations and global stability per se. This has been particularly true in the wake of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror during the Bush administration. India’s relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan is of supreme consequence to the developments in this volatile and conflict-ridden region. During its last period in power, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance mobilised the Indian army along the border with Pakistan after the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. In the preceding mandate period, it both initiated the ongoing nuclear arms race and fought a war with Pakistan in the district of Kargil. More recently, the BJP has been opposed to India’s nuclear treaty with the USA, arguing that it endangers the ‘independence’ of India’s nuclear policy (BJP 2008). One of the main themes of Hindu right rhetoric in recent years has, accordingly, focused on the securing of territorial borders. The language has revolved around notions of security, belonging and differentiation coinciding with nation state frontiers and citizenship.
Hegemony and assimilation: challenges to Hindu nationalism

It is clear from this brief overview of Hindu nationalism at home and abroad that the nationalism embodied and promulgated by the Hindu right does not straightforwardly correspond to a religious nationalism. The religious is merely present in its instrumental deployment of symbols and practices inherent to Hindu traditions. Even if we were to conclude that the conceptualisation of India advocated by the Hindu right corresponds to the term ‘religious nationalism’, it would still be necessary to indicate the exclusionary tendencies of its actions. Although Christophe Jaffrelot (2009: 8) maintains that the meaning ascribed to territory in Hindu nationalist discourse is primarily concerned with the deepening of ‘national solidarity’ and less with the unification of large parts of the subcontinent into an Akhand Bharat (‘Undivided India’), it is a solidarity that is more symbolic (for example, the rites and cartography of pilgrimage as discussed by Jaffrelot) than material. Furthermore, it is a conceptualisation that adopts the silencing of internal divisions and the reinforcement of nation state borders as its focal points. At the same time, it is an understanding of space which tends to keep social stratifications and power asymmetries intact. Jaffrelot’s (2009: 8) argument that the ‘desire to get beyond social divisions – especially beyond caste – is as old as Hindu nationalism itself’ is thus not unproblematic. With Sarkar (2005: 306) it might, conversely, be noted that ‘efforts to construct a more unified “Hinduism” had to confront a simultaneous development of multiple caste identities, while colonial (and postcolonial) modernization strengthened both Brahmanical influence, and lower-caste and Dalit protests’. It is an observation that points to the impossibility and the arbitrary endeavour to arrive at an unattainable totality and completion of the Hindu nationalist project.

In order to reconnect to the opening statement on the unexpected losses of the BJP in the last general election, it ought to be noted that, while in power, the party has failed to deliver in terms of integrative and inclusive measures—not only between, but also within religious communities. Hindu nationalism has not come to embody assimilatory practices—if understood in terms of Barr’s conceptual framework—beyond the reach of the urban middle class. According to Nandy (1998: 295), its scope is restricted to spaces wherein citizens have undergone a process of ‘massification’ and have been ‘made to speak only the language of the state’. It is, in other words, highly particularistic in its stances and its representations of the Indian population. As Sudheendra Kulkarni, one of its key political advisors in the 2009 election, wrote while analysing the poor performance of the BJP:

As far as taking the BJP closer to the minorities (Muslims and Christians) is concerned, both confusion and indifference within the party are of Himalayan magnitude. The mentality of a large section of the party is so dogmatic that any idea of promoting the welfare and development of Indian Muslims, or of addressing their legitimate concerns, is quickly brushed aside as
appeasement’. In five long years after 2004, the BJP did not come up with a single worthwhile initiative which Muslims could welcome (Kulkarni 2009).

Where, then, should we look for a religious nationalism that represents a more tolerant, inclusive and accommodating approach? One possibility is, of course, to cohere with the so-called neo-Gandhians—a term used to refer to scholars like Ashis Nandy and T.N. Madan. As argued earlier, Nandy has insisted on making a clear distinction between the Hindutva type of political ideology and Hinduism as permeating Indian culture. In describing this culture, Nandy (1983: 84–5) emphasises how the colonial encounter was designed to hide the real self—the deepest social consciousness of the victims—from the outsider. Madan (1987), similarly, has insisted that traditional culture could become the basis for a new Indian unity, while Partha Chatterjee (1993, quoted in Juergensmeyer 1996: 133) has argued in favour of a new historical nationalist project to ‘fashion a “modern” national culture that is nevertheless not Western’. When Nandy and other neo-Gandhians oppose the oppressive and homogenising values and institutions of the Enlightenment, modernity and colonialism, they praise instead an authentic traditional Indianness which has survived both the impact of modernity and the depredation of Hindu nationalism. Here, Nandy uses the language of ‘critical traditionalism’ as an emancipatory discourse for colonised (and recolonised, in the era of globalisation) societies.

Drawing on Juergensmeyer, one could argue that the neo-Gandhians rightly bring to our attention how

the Hindutva proponents have coopted the authentic, inclusive Indian cultural tradition; . . . It is this authentic cultural core that provides an alternative to the Hindutva–secularism dichotomy, allowing for the cultural integrity of the former and the tolerance of the latter (Juergensmeyer 1996: 134).

There is, however, an apparent problem inscribed into such a claim, namely the longing or search for an ‘authentic’ cultural core. As Radhika Desai (2002: 78) points out, Nandy’s ‘critical traditionalism’ has profound potential for authoritarianism: ‘[h]is conception of “tradition” or “culture” or “civilization” (terms he uses interchangeably) is an elite and conservative, and a Brahmanical, one’. Authentic tradition involves the search for a ‘true’ (religious) Hindu self that can resist the onslaught of modernity, secularism and the Westernised middle classes of India.

To the vain search for authenticity might be added that any political project trying to unearth resonance in a representation of the Indian nation or society as potentially complete or intact is destined to fail; or, as Dipesh Chakrabarty formulates it:

The assumption that there is a ‘whole’ in India that always trumps all conflicts and diversity does not strike us today with any degree of
obviousness beyond what the media or Bollywood can produce with cricket or the occasional war with Pakistan (Chakrabarty 2008: 179).

We thus propose that a more fruitful and constructive position is that offered by constructivist historians, such as van der Veer, Juergensmeyer and Oommen, who problematise the construction of knowledge and meaning, and show how hegemonic interpretations of religion and nation are always constructed in relation to discourses of power. This means that those who produce the discourse also have the power to make it true, that is to enforce a particular reading of a threat, according to which people and groups are defined (see Foucault 1980: 201). This power to make a discourse seemingly true is particularly evident in cases where one group holds more privileges and resources, and when it uses the language of difference as a way to legitimise its own dominance and to marginalise others (van Dijk 1997: 44). Hence, throughout history there have been, as van der Veer (1992) notes, many competing versions of Hindu nationalism and these versions have had more or less political support at different points in time. In addition, it is important to move away from the concept of secularism as existing in opposition to religion and/or communalism and to recognise that secularism actually implies minority rights. As Chandhoke (1999: 293) argues, an understanding of minority rights within secularism can be incorporated only when appealing to the antecedent principle of equality between and within communities.

Conclusion

In this article, we have evaluated the religious nationalism that the Hindu right has come to represent and established that it is merely religious in name. It is principally exclusionary in its deployment of religion. For a more dynamic and open type of religious-based nationalism or identity formation, certain readings of the Gandhian legacy might offer a potential point of departure. Although these, as shown, suffer from deficiencies, they still contain the seed of positive potential with regard to tolerance, inclusion and affirmation of belonging, particularly as these were developed in Nehruvian visions of a secular society in which religion should exist in all its multiplicity. In order for a nationalism, or any attempt to mobilise a collective, to meet the requirements of being inclusive and tolerant, it needs to carry a tendency equivalent to the one Sarkar (2005: 307)—perhaps rather benignly—detects in ‘Indian anti-colonialism’, which ‘at its best displayed an unusual capacity to criticize itself, an ability to both affirm and try to go beyond patriotic values’.

What the present form of Hindu nationalism lacks is such a self-reflexive, wavering, self-altering trait. It fails to recognise the constitutive emptiness and incompleteness of identity formation and of belonging. As such, it is merely yet another example of a movement that vainly seeks to establish ontological security. It may be correct to argue that the ‘religious nationalism’ disseminated
and enacted by the Hindu right has a constitutive and central function; but the way it has been developed has merely served to strengthen exclusive, non-accommodating majoritarian forces that have often been destructive, corroding and subversive. It would hence be flawed to claim that Hindu nationalism does not manifest itself in, or simultaneously constitute, violence. Reinterpreting religious nationalism in a positive sense requires that we move away from hegemonic definitions of what constitutes a community and a nation towards a secularism that truly puts religious rights at the forefront by recognising the needs of the individual members of both majority and minority communities at home as well as abroad.

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