



The Debate over Hindutva

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In India, the debate over the concept of Hindutva—indigenous Indian culture—is essentially a debate over the viability of cultural nationalism. In the United States, the concept of fundamentalism stirs similar debates, and for that reason some writers—mistakenly, I think—regard Hindutva as fundamentalist.

What 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 emergence of the Hindu-oriented Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a major political player in the 1991 elections and the spectacular destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya by Hindu nationalist mobs in 1992 has been followed by the stabilization of BJP as an important opposition party. Recent elections in December 1994 and February 1995 show persistent gains by the BJP and indicate that Hindu politics will be a factor on the Indian scene for some time to come.

How should one respond to this rise of religious politics in India? Is it a relatively benign force or a demonic one? Does it have legitimate roots in Indian tradition or is it a virus imported from some sort of world-wide fundamentalist plague? Is it a symptom of social and economic problems or is it purely a religious aberration? Is it a cynical use of religion by politicians or a corruption of politics by religious activists? Is it a matter for only Indians to be concerned about, or should it also alarm foreigners—including Americans—concerned about human rights around the world?

These questions are subjects of lively debate in India—not only on the streets and in the press, but in academic quarters—and they cause controversy in Europe and America as well. Articles in this issue of *Religion* exemplify aspects of the debate. For the purposes of this essay, I have looked at the arguments posed by the authors of two of these articles, James Lochtefeld and Brian Smith, and compared them with each other, and with those of others who have recently written on the topic. I have looked at the observations posed by scholars of Euro-American origin, including Lochtefeld, Smith, Peter van der Veer, Daniel Gold, Stanley Wolpert and myself.¹ I have also looked at the analyses posed by scholars of Indian origin, including Tapan Raychaudhuri and Vinay Lal, Ashis Nandy, T. N. Madan and Partha Chatterjee.²

What I want to suggest from all this is that the debate over Hindu nationalism is itself historically and socially located. Indians tend to emphasize issues specific to the Indian subcontinent and their own colonial past, whereas non-Indians often look at global issues, especially those similar or related to Euro-American concerns. Within the Indian perspective there is a split between the secularist and non-secularist camps, and within the Euro-American points of view there are differences between classic liberal and relativist positions. The arguments have been especially heated over the following issues.

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Is Religious Fundamentalism the Prime Factor?

The rise of religious nationalism in various parts of the world has often been characterized as 'fundamentalism' in the Western media. Hindu nationalist movements have been routinely identified that way. At the time of the attack on the Ayodhya mosque, for instance, the *New York Times* reporter on the scene wrote about 'savage intolerance' of Hindu 'fundamentalists'.³ The English language press in India—including especially *India Today*—largely followed suit.

Academics in Europe and the United States have also discovered fundamentalism in India in the guise of Hindu nationalism. Writing in *Contention*, Stanley Wolpert has spoken of the 'virulent resurgence of Hindu Fundamentalism' in Indian politics.⁴ Writing on 'organized Hinduisms' in the first volume of the Fundamentalism Project, Daniel Gold has characterized two Hindu movements—the Arya Samaj and the

Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—as ‘fundamentalist’, explaining that they met the defining criterion of involving a ‘resolute religious reaction to forces of modernity’.⁵ These examples from Hindu experience helped to meet the expectations of the project—namely, that fundamentalism exists throughout the world. By including these Hindu examples in the project’s list, the organizers, Martin Marty and Scott Appelby, implied that Hindu religious activism is part of a virtually global ‘family’ of fundamentalism.⁶

This idea does not sit well with many scholars, however, especially in India where social analysts tend to look at India’s own historical experience to explain contemporary social phenomena. In India, the term ‘Hindu fundamentalism’ tends to be avoided by most academics, even those like Tapan Raychaudhuri who are adamantly opposed to Hindu political movements. Raychaudhuri has characterized them as fascist and Nazi-like, but not fundamentalist.⁷ Ashis Nandy has referred to fundamentalism in a specific sense, as the flip side of secularism, regarding both as alien to traditional Indian experience.⁸ Although Vinay Lal, in the present article, has agreed with Nandy on this point, he has gone further and denounced most uses of the fundamentalist label in the Indian context, branding Wolpert’s appropriation of the term, for example, as ‘Orientalist’.⁹

What has disturbed Lal and other scholars about the term ‘Hindu fundamentalism’ are essentially two things. The first is the notion that Hindu activism is part of a world-wide movement—or, as Brian Smith puts it, that the Hindutva movement is among ‘religious ‘fundamentalisms’ everywhere’ that are leading the world ‘towards absolutism, intolerance and militancy’.¹⁰ Lal has found it unlikely that a concept such as fundamentalism—born of the unique experience of early twentieth century Protestant America and widely used as a pejorative term for religious zealotry—could carry sufficient conceptual weight to provide contemporary world-wide comparisons. This is an objection that has been raised by other scholars as well, including a Harvard historian of modern Judaism, Jay Harris, who has said that the term is simply an intolerant epithet for those we regard as intolerant. According to Harris, fundamentalism is ‘a label that immediately delegitimizes’, and is ‘one of many strategies we employ to allow ourselves to ignore the ugly and imperialistic side of modern culture’.¹¹ To many Indian scholars, the easy use of the term in the Indian situation is tantamount to a flippant dismissal of what is distinctively Indian about the activist movements.

Lal’s other objection to ‘Hindu fundamentalism’ is that the term implies that Hindu political movements are essentially about or motivated by religious concerns. Gold has said as much in his essay for The Fundamentalism Project when he stated that the movements in his study were nurtured by ‘specifically religious factors’.¹² Wolpert also raised religious intolerance as the prime factor leading to the Ayodhya debacle, an observation that has been strongly rejected by Lal, who has argued that economic, social and political factors were all part of the dynamics of the Ayodhya uprising. Religion, in Lal’s view, was the symptom but not the cause. According to Lal, the popular hatred of government affirmative action and development policies as well as the ‘complicated inter-relationship of caste, class, religion and ethnicity’ were possible causes for the religious rioting.¹³ In general, I agree with Lal’s position regarding the political nature of religious activism, and largely for that reason have avoided using the term ‘fundamentalism’ in my own writings.¹⁴ I do see religious nationalism as a world-wide phenomenon, however, in that there is currently a rejection of the ideology of modernity in many parts of the world.¹⁵ But I agree with Lal’s and Raychaudhuri’s attempts to delineate reasons for the rejection in India that are shaped by Indian history

(in Raychaudhuri's analysis) and contemporary Indian economic and social concerns (as implied by Lal).

Are Religious Politics Native to India?

Another issue which has given rise to debate is the matter of whether the current form of religious politics in India is native to Indian tradition or an import from outside. Curiously, few scholars seem willing to accept it as indigenously Indian. Those who have held to the notion of a world-wide fundamentalist uprising have seen it as an Indian infection of a near-global plague. But the Indian scholars who opposed this view and insisted on explaining the rise of religious politics from within an Indian frame of reference also saw it as essentially an alien phenomenon.

Raychaudhuri, for instance, has presented an explanation for India's religious politics that is at once external and distinctively Indian: the experience of colonialism. In his analysis, the current religious politics of the BJP-variety is an extension of what used to be called communalism—the rivalry between Hindu and Muslim communities. And he has asserted what is commonly accepted in Indian academic circles, that communalism was created by the British colonial policy of divide and rule. Even today's communal hatreds, Raychaudhuri averred, are a part of India's 'damned inheritance'—the 'end product' of the 'historical contingencies of the colonial era'.¹⁶

Lal has concurred with Raychaudhuri's assessment of the effects of British policy, but stopped short of labelling the current religious politics in India as a product of colonialist-induced communalism. Rather, Lal has castigated those who analyse the Hindutva and BJP movements as communalist, claiming it is their analyses as much as the movements themselves that have perpetuated a colonialist mentality. In this regard he shares the perspective of Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, who have also been concerned with how ways of thinking about contemporary politics in India constitute what Chatterjee has called 'a derivative discourse'—and what Nandy has called an extension of colonialist 'consciousness' and 'psychology'.¹⁷ Both have regarded the recovery of pre-colonial cultural roots as the unfinished business of the nationalist movement, and both have longed for a culture-based sense of national identity that is unifying rather than divisive. In that sense they, like Raychaudhuri, have seen the extreme religious movements in contemporary India as perpetuating the colonialist attitude of communalism.

Into this discussion of communalism and colonialism, Peter van der Veer, writing in the epilogue of his book on religious nationalism in India, has stepped somewhat delicately.¹⁸ While he has agreed with Chatterjee and Nandy in general about the effect of British colonial policies, van der Veer has questioned two assumptions of Nandy and other Indian scholars regarding communalism: that there was a unified, syncretic cultural base preceding (or underlying) communal identities, and that current communal hostilities are the direct result of colonial rule. Van der Veer called the 'syncretism' thesis a 'trope in the discourse of 'multiculturalism'', and claimed there was no reason to argue that India lost its tolerance as the result of the colonial construction of communalism.¹⁹ Instead, van der Veer located the rise of religious politics as a part of modern nationalist identities that were emerging in India in the 19th century at about the same time they were emerging in Europe and other parts of the world. They were parallel histories, albeit interactive ones, and van der Veer asserted—and I concur—that the peculiarities of Indian society and history were indeed peculiarly its own. India's forms of religious nationalism, therefore, could not easily be 'reduced to the master narrative of European modernity'.²⁰

Is Religious Nationalism Evil or Benign?

Perhaps the most heated aspects of the debate have been over the political implications of Hindu activism. To put it simply, have these movements been a sinister force that must be eradicated by virtually any means possible, or are they relatively benign? The responses to this question are strong, and do not correspond to the Indian/non-Indian dichotomy. There have been divisions on both sides. But the reasons for the divisions on each side of the dichotomy are not the same.

In Europe and America this aspect of the debate pitches against one another those who lean toward classic liberalism and those who tend towards relativism. By 'classic liberalism', I mean defence of Enlightenment values of freedom of speech and a broad licence for individual rights, and by 'relativism' I mean a laissez-faire attitude toward cultural differences. Few people take these extreme positions, of course, but these poles mark the differences that stand between many scholarly positions. Van der Veer, for instance, has introduced his study of religious nationalism in India with the demurral that he found difficult the 'liberal' position of condemning religious nationalists', and preferred not to take sides.²¹

Some liberal American scholars—no doubt with the memory of Nazism in their minds—have been particularly vocal about the responsibility of academia to take sides and defend the virtues of human rights. They have demanded that academics speak out against what Harold Gould has characterized as India's flirtation with 'native fascism'.²² Brian Smith, who has accepted the parallels between Nazism and the Hindutva movement without any hesitation, has stated the position strongly: he has called for his fellow scholars to 'drop the self-deluded facade of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' and stand up for our own principles'.²³ Implicitly criticizing Western observers such as Lochtefeld, van der Veer and me, who have engaged in description and 'Weberian 'understanding'', Smith has charged that this relativist position 'results in providing scholarly legitimation for distortions of truth and murderous attempts at ethnic or religious cleansing'.²⁴

Smith has not been alone in expressing frustration with the patience of scholarship. My book on religious nationalism, although characterized in one article in the *New York Times* as being 'careful and dispassionate', was criticized in another in the same newspaper for not being more judgmental.²⁵ The author of the latter article, Herbert Mitgang, challenged writers like me to 'go out on a limb' and condemn those who 'destroy civilized order'.²⁶ Had I had the opportunity to respond, I would have said that the scholar's job is primarily to explain rather than to condemn, and that in any event I have yet to be convinced that the BJP movement is a reincarnation of the Nazis. I suspect, however, that Mitgang would have been more satisfied with Smith.

As frustrated as Smith is with his cohorts in America, his most passionate criticisms have been reserved for his Indian colleagues, Ashis Nandy and T. N. Madan—whom he has labelled 'left-leaning intellectuals'.²⁷ Smith has said that their positions criticizing secularism 'play into the hands' of the Hindutva movement.²⁸ Indian scholars such as Imtiaz Ahmad have also made this criticism of Nandy and Madan, and although Raychaudhuri did not directly challenge them in his article, his description of the Sangh Parivar—the 'family' of Hindutva movements identified with the RSS and BJP—as 'fascist', similar to both the Mafia and the Nazis, has left no doubt in the reader's mind as to how the author would regard those who do not condemn the movements in a similarly strong fashion. In India this aspect of the debate is not between liberals and relativists, however, but between neo-Nehru secularists and neo-Gandhian cultural nationalists.

But the fact that scholars such as Nandy and Madan stand on the neo-Gandhian side of the divide does not necessarily make them supporters of the Hindutva claims. Nandy has made a big distinction between the Hindutva type of political ideology and Hinduism—regarding the latter as a ‘faith and a way of life’ that permeates traditional Indian culture.²⁹ He has implied that the BJP has exploited a legitimate yearning for Indians to create a postcolonial sense of national identity out of their own cultural roots. Madan has made something of the same point in his critique of secularism in India. Although wary of ‘the real dangers of Hindu communalism’, Madan has said that he and his fellow intellectuals in India have to ‘overcome our distrust of India’s indigenous religious traditions.’³⁰ His hope is that this substratum of traditional culture can become the basis for a new Indian unity. A similar hope has been expressed by Partha Chatterjee, who has argued that nationalism in India is poised to launch its ‘most powerful, creative and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western’.³¹ In a poignant article that was otherwise largely critical of the Hindutva movement, the social psychologist Sudhir Kakar recognized that the movement has touched on a legitimate need for a society to have what Durkheim has called ‘a continuity of collective memory’ in order for it to move constructively from the past to the future.³² Thus some of India’s leading intellectuals—virtually all of them Hindu—have yearned to embrace at least some of the aspects of the Hindutva claim of cultural unity in India, albeit one shorn of stridency and intolerance.

It would appear that Nandy, Madan and others who have expressed this antiseccular line of thinking have been making the claim that the traditional character of Indian religion is more like the Chinese model than the European one. Unlike Europe’s clear demarcation of religious communities—seemingly forever in quarrel with one another—China has had layers of religious affiliation over the centuries, each absorbing and interacting with the other. In most college textbooks on world religion, Chinese religion has been identified as essentially that, a unified tradition with Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian strands. Nandy and Madan seem to have made the same claim about India: that the various religious traditions in India, as Madan has put it, are ‘members of one family’.³³ Madan went on to specify the similarities that underly popular Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and presumably even Indian Islam: ‘they share crucial metaphysical presuppositions’, and their followers ‘share many attitudes and have many social practices in common’.³⁴

If the point is that there is a shared core of cultural sensibilities that undergird all religious communities in India, then I would say it is an interesting and intellectually defensible position, one that I find reasonable and historically sound. Even if van der Veer was right and the present proponents of traditional syncretism have exaggerated the degree of cultural unity that has existed in the past, there is sufficient anthropological evidence to suggest that there is at present indeed an Indian ‘style’ of religiosity. L. A. Babb, writing about three seemingly marginal religious movements in contemporary North India, has detected strands of religious sensibilities common to all three that have nothing to do with creeds or beliefs in a narrow sense. Rather, they are about notions of a fluid sense of self, a spiritual physiology, the interpenetration of sacred and secular realms, human abilities to convey spiritual power, and the like.³⁵ One could say that there is a kind of spiritual reflex akin to most Indians as part of their common cultural heritage.

Whatever this core of Indian religious sensibilities might be, however, I would hesitate to call it ‘Hinduism’. Moreover, Nandy and Madan’s discussion of the matter has not been entirely intellectually innocent, for it has come at a time when the most

strident proponents of Hindutva have been making the same point to buttress their own warped version of cultural unity. What Nandy and Madan need to do—and indeed, I believe have tried to do—is to argue that the Hindutva proponents have coopted the authentic, inclusive Indian cultural tradition; and though some may call it Hinduism, it plays no favourites among Hindu, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Christians in contemporary Indian society. 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.

This is a proposal that appeals to optimists such as me who would like very much to think that there is a way around the theoretical impasse between religious and secular notions of nationalism. It might also appeal to an Indian public grown weary of strident extremes. It will not, however, charm proponents of either side of the Hindutva–secularism dichotomy. Scholars such as Raychaudhuri and Brian Smith will likely continue to agree with the dark assessments of committed secularists such as Ainslie Embree, who have observed that ‘the vocabulary of religion has corrupted political discourse in India’, and predicted that it is ‘likely to continue to do so in the immediate future’.³⁶ It is perhaps rude to wish them wrong, but for the sake of India’s political future—and perhaps also for the sake of the many societies wrestling with similar proposals for a tolerant but culturally-based nationalism, it would be nice to think that Nandy and Madan could be right.

Notes

- 1 James G. Lochtefeld, ‘New Wine, Old Skins: The Sangh Parivār and the Transformation of Hinduism’, and Brian Smith, ‘Re-Envisioning Hinduism and Evaluating the Hindutva Movement’, both in this issue; see also Smith’s *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989; Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994; Daniel Gold, ‘Organized Hinduism: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation’, in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appelby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed*, vol. 1 of the Fundamentalism Project, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 531–593; Stanley Wolpert, ‘Resurgent Hindu Fundamentalism’, *Contention*, 2: Spring 1993; and Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, chapter 4. This article in a slightly different form also appears in *Contention*. My thanks to the editors of *Contention* and *Religion* for arranging for the dual publication of this essay.
- 2 Tapan Raychaudhuri, ‘Shadows of the Swastika: Historical Reflections on the Politics of Hindu Communalism’, and Vinay Lal, ‘Hindu ‘Fundamentalism’ Revisited’, both in *Contention*, 5: Fall 1995; Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, and ‘The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance’, in Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, 69–93; T. N. Madan, *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, ‘Secularism in its Place’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46: Fall, 1987, 747–759, and ‘Whither Indian Secularism?’ *Modern Asian Studies*, 27: 1993, 667–697; and Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, and *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- 3 Edward A. Gargan, ‘Savage Intolerance: Fundamentalism in South Asia Isn’t All Islam’, *New York Times*, 13 December 1992, sec. 4, p. 1.
- 4 Wolpert, *Resurgent Hindu Fundamentalism*, p. 9.
- 5 Gold, *Organized Hinduisms*, p. 533.
- 6 Marty and Appelby, *Fundamentalism Observed*, p. ix.
- 7 Raychaudhuri, *Shadows of the Swastika*, *passim*.
- 8 Ashis Nandy, ‘In the Name of God’, *Sunday Observer*, (Delhi) December 1992, pp. 6–12.
- 9 Lal, ‘Hindu “Fundamentalism” Revisited’, pp. 1–2 [ms.].
- 10 Smith, ‘Re-envisioning Hinduism’, p. 16 [ms.].

- 11 Jay M. Harris, ‘“Fundamentalism”’: Objections from a Modern Jewish Historian’, in J. S. Hawley, ed., *Fundamentalism and Gender* New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 138–9.
- 12 Gold, *Organized Hinduisms*, p. 580.
- 13 Lal, *Hindu ‘Fundamentalism’ Revisited*, p. 4 [ms.]
- 14 See my article, ‘Why Religious Nationalists are not Fundamentalists’, *Religion* 23 (1993) pp. 85–92.
- 15 Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?*, *passim*.
- 16 Raychaudhuri, *Shadows of the Swastika*, pp. 31–32 [ms.]. The other culprit Raychaudhuri identifies as having goaded contemporary communal passions is ‘Mrs Gandhi’s now notorious policy of playing the Hindu card’ (p. 32 [ms.]).
- 17 Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (the term is in the subtitle); and Nandy. *The Intimate Enemy*, pp. 2, 63.
- 18 Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, pp. 193–202.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 21 Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, p. xv.
- 22 Harold A. Gould, ‘Fascism Wrapped in Saffron Robe’, *Times of India*, 1 July, 1993, p. 3.
- 23 Smith, ‘Re-envisioning Hinduism’, *Religion*, p. 2 [ms.].
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Paul Johnson, ‘Our God Can Lick Your God’, *New York Times Book Review*, 9 May 1993, p. 7; and Herbert Mitgang, ‘Islam, Fundamentalism and the West’, *New York Times*, 11 August 1993, p. B3.
- 26 Mitgang, ‘Islam, Fundamentalism’, p. B3.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 10 [ms.].
- 29 Ashis Nandy, ‘Hinduism versus Hindutva: The Inevitability of a Confrontation’, *Times of India*, 18 February 1991.
- 30 Madan, *Whither Indian Secularism?* p. 696.
- 31 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 6.
- 32 Sudhir Kakar, ‘The New Hindu Identity: A Profile’, Electronic Newsstand, an on-line news service, 1994.
- 33 Madan, *Whither Indian Secularism?* p. 696.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 L. A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
- 36 Ainslie T. Embree, *Utopias in Conflict: Religion and Nationalism in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 132.

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