



Hindutva as Praxis

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Abstract

This article is the third and last in a series of three surveying research on Hindutva (Hindu nationalism or political Hinduism), focusing on praxis: processes by which hindutva is mobilized, operationalized, and made relatable to specific contexts. As hindutva's influences expand to grassroots and diasporic contexts, mediated by discourses of rights, development, and cultures of multiculturalist ethnic assertions, hindutva becomes a *mediating* discourse in its own right. As such, it is sometimes a diffused logic and sometimes a clear point of reference, but always undeniably central to contemporary political practice at all levels. (The first essay in this series of three surveyed literature on seminal ideological articulations of hindutva, both historical and contemporary; the second examined prominent rhetorical constructions deployed to politically oppose hindutva).

Introduction

Scholarly writings about the phenomenon of Hindu nationalism have followed a somewhat predictable arc since the mid-1980s, with the treatment of colonial or post-independence expressions of hindutva as a pathological curiosity giving way first to bewilderment and then to certain denunciation in the mid-1990s and thereafter. This condemnatory chorus, however, also contained nascent strains of a conceptualization of hindutva as *praxis*: not merely a political ideology, but a (troubling) way of thinking through and addressing social problems and community concerns. Now, some two decades later still, that incipient focus has been elaborated considerably in studies that stress articulations of hindutva in particular environments—and it is these works and the emergent approach they represent, that the present essay surveys. What is distinctive about recent literature is not its lack of opposition, in contrast to the writings of the 1990s, but a heightened attention to the imbrications of hindutva with other sorts of politics, be these diasporic claims or caste-based mobilizations. To the question ‘What is Hindutva?’ current literature seems to respond as much with the politically oriented sureties crystallized by the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition and the 2002 Gujarat riots, but equally now with close attention to the specific contexts, vocabularies, methods, and logics hindutva provides for daily practices and political contestations alike, at grassroots, national, and trans-national levels. The result is a recognition of hindutva as a politics that is integrating—‘entrenching’ or ‘vernacularizing’—itself into a rapidly widening and increasingly influential range of contemporary political practices. Dhooleka Raj has written of Punjabi Londoners that “there is no Hindu Punjabi ‘community’,” only “*moments when community occurs*, when people gather as a whole, because of a certain criterion of religious identification” (2003, p. 93 emphasis added). Much the same could indeed be said of hindutva: that it does not always-already exist in pre-determined form, but occurs most powerfully at moments when the interests and identifications of disperse groups come most closely into alignment. The present survey examines the operationalization of

hindutva logics in devolving social welfare, historical revisionist, and diasporic multiculturalist praxis, as a means of marking some of the broadly constituted moments at which ‘hindutva’ occurs—ironically, perhaps also tellingly, at a moment when its electoral future is anything but certain.¹ The final section considers research on the processes by which hindutva is articulated in vernacular idiom, thereby drawing local political interests into visible relief. This survey therefore documents hindutva’s coming of age as a discourse that mediates political practices of all sorts, without always or necessarily being driven by its ideological core.²

Seva

Seva, or social welfare development, is to grassroots mobilization what *swadeshi* is to national economic policy: a means by which to meet the processes of modernization in a fundamentally Indian idiom (cf. Biswas 2004; Dyahadroy 2009). A commitment to *seva* has long been core to hindutva praxis, particularly in rural areas. Beckerlegge reports that the RSS’ interest in social welfare development derives from the philosophy of service developed in the context of Indian nationalism, by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, for whom *seva* was a “means to achieve an ultimate goal”, whether “spiritual fulfillment or nation building” (2006, p. 130; 2003, 2004). Social welfare is key to hindutva’s post-independence organizational diversification and a means by which to recover respectability lost in the wake of Gandhi’s assassination, adds Hansen (1999, p. 96). Jaffrelot writes of the RSS-organized Hindu Sahayata Samiti, set up to address the needs of refugees fleeing from West Pakistan at the time of Partition, and of the later systematization of the Sangh Parivar’s social welfare strategies via its affiliate, *Seva Bharati* (‘Service to India’), established in 1974 (2005, p. 212).

Several, if not all, of the early social welfare organizations were established specifically to counter Christian proselytization—pointing to the long, on-going framing of grassroots hindutva around this particular tension (Hansen 1999, pp. 104–7; Sarkar 2005, pp. 199–200, 2007; Sundar 2005, p. 202). Paradoxically, Jaffrelot notes, the processes of “stigmatization [are] accompanied by emulation” (1996, p. 346), and so the hindutva rejoinder to Christian missionizing and the logic of liberation theologies comes in the form of renewed emphasis on its approximate Indian/Hindu equivalent, *seva*. Replicating the strategies of the 1920s Shuddhi/Sanghatan movement which attempted to convert outcasts to hinduism, organizations like Ekal Vidyalaya, the Hindu Jagran Manch, *Seva Bharati*, and others constituting the ‘social service wing’ of the Sangh Parivar have devoted themselves to setting up schools, healthcare centres, attending to food and water supply issues, providing vocational training, legal aid and more, targeting adivasis (tribal communities) and the rural poor, particularly in areas where Christian demographics are increasing (Menon 2003, p. 48; Shah 1999, p. 316; Zavos 2001, p. 83–4). Mixed into 1990s models of *seva* are, therefore, other more-and-less assertive tactics that scholars often dub ‘Hinduization’: for instance, synchronizing adivasi religious and cultural practices with those of mainstream Hinduism, outright harassment, organizing *sammelans* or reconversion ceremonies, and even arguing that adivasis are better off Hindu because the Dalit Christian campaign for Scheduled Caste status does not lobby on their behalf (Shah 1999, p. 316). Kanungo and Joshi (2009) report further that Swami Aseemanand of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) is unconcerned by non-vegetarianism and even alcohol consumption among Dangis (a Gujarati tribal community) as long as they remain Hindu—though Gujarat’s “visceral nationalism” is otherwise strongly associated with vegetarianism (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009, p. 81). Such varied tactics speak to Hansen’s observation that a

populist form of “catholic Hinduism” emerges from the conversion debate to centre on “a program of organization, syncretism, and nationalization of existing practices” (1999, p. 107). This catholicized Hinduism logically reconfigures the Hindu community into an “aggressive bloc” (Sarkar 1999, p. 1691) by redrawing and reasserting religious boundaries. Development work thus provides fertile ground for contests over community boundaries; *seva* reconstitutes hindutva as a particular form of praxis, here with an apparently distinct semitic edge.

This model of social welfare development has, predictably, also a distinct emphasis on (re)education (Jaffrelot 2005). Indeed, Sangh-affiliated NGOs working in the field of education are many: Vidya Bharati, a sister-affiliate to Seva Bharati, “caters mostly to a lower-middle-class and upper-caste base”; the VKA “specializes in welfare schemes for *adivasis* [...] including hostels for school children”; and the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation “runs single teacher three hour centers for preschool children where they are taught the rudiments of reading and writing, Sanskrit and *sanskars* (good behavior)” (Sundar 2005, p. 196). These organizations, taken collectively, are no doubt deeply concerned with the infusion of “Hindu awareness and national discipline” (Jaffrelot 2005, p. 216)—a fact which some read straightforwardly as effecting “indoctrination, hierarchy, and exclusion” (Sundar 2005, p. 211). By design or default, however, nationalist ideological objectives also appear shot through with more basic, practically oriented development goals—a fact which locates hindutva *seva* less its own, and more amidst the social service work of other neo-Hindu groups who either eschew or strategically select their political commitments (cf. Beckerlegge 2006; Toffin 2011; Warriar 2003). For instance, Jaffrelot notes that Seva Bharati’s purpose is to simultaneously inculcate values of “national awareness *and* a sense of hygiene,” “what is good for society *and* how [one] can be useful to society”—and thereby to “assimilate marginal populations which are naturally appreciative of charitable work into a Hindu nation” (2005, pp. 213, 212, emphasis added). Sundar notes, too, that the appeal of RSS schools to middle-class parents is precisely that they produce the much sought-after good exam results, with nationalist discipline tagged on as added value (2005, p. 212). Hindu nationalist models of *seva* thus seem to exemplify this twin commitment to “noble and virtuous themes” that can be ideologically oriented, and to academic performance, “basic hygiene, better manners, and respect for [...] elders and society” (Jaffrelot 2005, p. 216). In this, hindutva exemplifies what Jaffrelot and Hansen (1998, p. 2) describe as a movement between “ideological purity and pragmatism”: a practically expanding, ideologically contracting model of outreach that the Dalit writer Ilaiah complains of in the Mandal debate over reservations and that continues to shape BJP policy (Ilaiah 1996, p. 166).

Revisionism

Of course, to take ‘ideological purity’ as something apart from pragmatism is to give it a primacy that probably never exists in practice. Nonetheless, there have been junctures when Sangh Parivar agenda has appeared more ideologically definite, even pure. The episode of historical revisionism of the late 1990s is one such. The furore over revisions to textbooks issued by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)—the pseudo-autonomous flagship organization that sets school curricula generally followed by other national and state school boards—began in late 1998, soon after the BJP entered office as leading member of a coalition government. Under the leadership of Murli Manohar Joshi, an ‘RSS man’, the NCERT issued a National Curriculum Framework for School Education with a commitment to “Indianize, nationalize and

spiritualize” curricula at all levels of education, increasing content on the “essentials of Indian culture” from “10% to 25%”.³ What this meant was evident soon enough from the additions and deletions to the soon-after-released history and social science textbooks, which caused nothing short of scholarly uproar. Both historians and other commentators in the Indian press held that these ‘saffronized’ texts paid scant regard to “the practice of history writing, the uses of evidence, methods of interpretation” (Modi 2002), thus presenting mediaeval Indian history uncomplicatedly as a long series of Muslim assaults on indigenous Hindus (Delhi Historians’ Group 2001; Hasan 2002; Sundar 2002), Rama and Krishna as historical figures, ignoring historical hierarchies based on caste and even Vedic Aryans’ occasional consumption of beef (Sanghvi 2001). In this, scholars held the NCERT to have brazenly “reproduced the RSS’s ideological agenda” not only by producing flawed and partial accounts, but giving “textual sanctity” to hindutva myths (Delhi Historians’ Group 2001; Sundar 2005, pp. 198, 199).

It bears noting that this was not the first time hindutva ideologues had produced revisions of Indian history. Witzel names Savarkar (1883–1966) and Golwalker (1906–1973) as contemporary hindutva’s revisionist forefathers for providing, in their writings, the fundamental tenets which now inform much of public, political, and scholarly discourse—so much so that hindutva revisionism devolved into a cottage industry by the mid-1990s, its principles reproduced even by those not explicitly towing the hindutva line (2006, pp. 204–5). Among the better known outlets for revisionist publication are Aditya Prakashan and the Voice of India publishing house in Delhi, founded in 1963 and 1982, respectively, which have put out works on key issues such as the Aryan Invasion Theory and the Ramjanmabhoomi claim (cf. Bergunder 2004, pp. 88–94). Such common “corrective[s] to the distorted secular perspectives” of Indian historians and scholars, being independent and not state-initiated, and thus did not constitute a challenge to scholarly authority (Hasan 2002, p. 196). The NCERT revisions, by contrast, were state-instituted in combination with other similar efforts to monitor the work of organizations like the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), to reconstitute the leadership of the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA) and the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), and to introduce college courses in ‘Vedic Astrology’ as a branch of indigenous “traditional and classical knowledge” (quoted in Sundar 2002, p. 375). The last move added astrology to a curious mix of fields including “Hindu Mathematics, *Vastushastra*, Meteorological Studies, Agriculture Science, Space Science etc.” (quoted in Sundar 2002, p. 375). In short, these steps made full and open use of political power to undercut what the BJP government saw as Marxist and (to a lesser extent) Congress loyalties, fundamentally destabilizing the established authority of historians and social scientists in the Indian academy, and calling into doubt not just *social science* method, but the boundaries of scientific rationality itself.

In the meantime, curiously enough, the BJP consistently held on to its position that the existence of a Hindu temple underneath the rubble of the Babri Masjid was a matter to be resolved by scientific, archaeological investigation. Its questioning of the very basis of scientific authority at some moments and its apparently opportunistic uses of history and science at others have lead scholars to worry about the cooptation of science ‘to push sectarian agendas’ (Ratnagar 2004, p. 243). Indian archaeology’s overt preoccupation with roots, packaged together with cultural pride, Ratnagar argues, itself ‘prepares the ground for nativism’ and makes archaeology “prone to political expediency in the name of an imagined national interest” (2004, p. 248). Thus, Gupta notes in response to Ratnagar, that the “absence of scholarly verification is not likely to change the demand for a Ram temple,” for the Ramjanmabhoomi issue is essentially a matter of faith. He continues:

“scholars who wish to take a ‘scientific’ stance on this issue” and argue with the evidence against the existence of a Rama temple, will find themselves inevitably “in a position that, however, solid from a scholarly perspective, is politically untenable” precisely because the hindutva argument is not with science itself, nor with history, but with “defective scholarship” (response to Ratnagar 2004, p. 254). The remedy to defective scholarship is of course not simply conservative traditionalism and an outright rejection of science, but a reconstituted claim to scholarly authority that combines “the language of Hinduism [with] the epistemological imperatives of modernity and the nation-state” (Lal 1999, p. 163). For scholars writing about hindutva, it is precisely this reconstituted approach which presents cause for complaint: “point-by-point rebuttal in pandit-like discussions” dominate historiographical debate, objects Witzel (2006, pp. 207–8), and others continue to worry about the lack of methodological rigour that allows “mythology [to] masquerad[e] as history”, and history to lend legitimacy to communal politics (Panikkar 2001; Visvesvaran *et al.* 2009, p. 104).⁴

Hindutva as revisionist praxis, replete as it was with abrasive name-calling and at times insufficient and unsophisticated research, has thus profoundly blurred the lines between scholarship and ideology—in fact, has held history as it was written by India’s ‘eminent historians’ to be itself ideological, evidence of an implicitly biased politics that demands critique. The ensuing outcry then evokes spectres of censorship, Pakistan’s authoritarian handling of history, even “Talibanization” (Sanghvi 2001). Historians like Romila Thapar reassert that the “confrontation is not between Leftist and Rightist historians, but between *professional historians* and *politicians* sympathetic to the hindutva persuasion” (2001, emphasis added). So fraught is the debate at this juncture, however, that distinctions between scholarship and politics themselves become untenable, with the result that expert representations of all things Hindu stay consistently embattled thereafter.⁵

Misrepresentations

Through these increasingly wrenching debates, the capacity of hindutva politics to mobilize varying degrees of *outrage* also becomes progressively more evident. Blom and Jaoul hold the processes of framing “discontent into the vocabulary of moral outrage” to “constitute specific dimensions of South Asia’s political culture [of] public dissent” (Blom & Jaoul 2008, p. 8)—but such reactions are hardly limited to the subcontinent. Quite the contrary, outrage as a distinctive mode of expressing public dissent finds tremendous play in Indian/Hindu diasporic contests over representation, further elaborating the logics by which hindutva is invoked in local praxis, in this case within parameters set by state-sponsored multiculturalism.

There a good deal of research that points to the ways in which multiculturalism mediates expressions of Hinduism—and therefore also hindutva—in diasporic settings. Prema Kurien tells us that the institutionalization of Hinduism in the United States has led somewhat paradoxically to its politicization: the increasingly self-confident Hindu claim to ‘ethnic American identity’ becomes “a means to obtain recognition and validation in multicultural America” (Kurien 2007, p. 2). Indeed, the ‘Hindu’ label itself acquires a particular sort of salience and saleability in diasporic contexts. Searle-Chatterjee writes that a “self-consciousness induced by racism and minority status encourages the reification [and conflation] of religion and culture,” flattening regional, *jati*, and other more nuanced religious identifications into a recognizable Hinduism cast in the mould of other “world religions” (2000, pp. 497, 504–5). This sort of state-initiated essentialist incorporation of things Hindu into broader multifaith or multicultural admixtures is perhaps akin to what

Chakrabarty (2002) has termed (in another context) a “governmental use of ethnicity”—that clearly opens the door for communities to then claim ‘hinduness’ in a range of more-and-less assertive, more-and-less political ways.

The flashpoints generating outrage fall into roughly two categories. First, there are the public, commercial exploitations of Hindu iconography, which have developed into heated contests over ‘image rights’: Sony’s use of a Krishna-like figure on Aerosmith’s 1997 *Nine Lives* album, disparaging references to elements of Hindu practice in a 2002 House of Fraser clothing advertisement in the UK, Hindu icons on footwear, underwear, toilet seat covers and even in the 2005 UK Royal Mail Christmas stamp set, and model Heidi Klum’s Kali costume for her 2008 Halloween Party. In response, organizations like the VHPA’s American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD) project and the Hindu International Council Against Defamation (HICAD) have harnessed established anti-defamation rhetoric toward a parallel “defense of Hinduism against defamation, commercialization, and misuse” (Kurien 2007, p. 150), vocally and very successfully protesting commercial (mis)uses of Hindu iconography and “insensitive portrayals” of deities in the media (http://www.hindunet.org/anti_defamation/). In the UK, ISKCON took on and won its case against the House of Fraser (Zavos 2008), and the Hindu Human Rights Watch, charging the French government with human rights abuses for not recognizing Hinduism as an “accepted faith tradition”, reclaimed all the shoes manufactured with Lord Rama’s image on them by the French fashion house, Minelli (Raj 2009).

Second, there are the stereotypical and often poorly informed representations of Hinduism in American school textbooks, increasingly a concern for Hindu parent and educator organizations. First in Virginia and later in California, Hindu community groups sought to participate in the process of textbook revision, and to correct what they saw as inaccurate or insensitive representations. The 2005–2006 social science/history textbook revision process in California is of interest here, as it resulted in a controversy that pitted various community and parent groups⁶ against a loosely organized but influential community of Indianist academics over the details of how Hinduism and Hindu history should be taught to 6th grade students in the State (Bose 2008; Reddy forthcoming b). Community claims in this case were based on the apparently straightforward multiculturalist need for equitable portrayals of cultural and racial diversity, and the imperative to “project cultural diversity, instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage, develop a feeling of self-pride and eradicate roots of prejudice.”⁷ But, scholars objected, the pride sought was one inflected by hindutva rhetorics, since the community groups suggested edits to the textbooks seemed to echo Hindu nationalist positions on issues such as the Aryan Invasion Theory, the position of women, and the issue of caste. Writing on behalf of a list of 46 other Indianists, Harvard Sanskritist Witzel straightforwardly characterized the Hindu groups as Hindutva supporters and non-specialists—invoking both multiculturalist protections against discrimination, and drawing on equally multiculturalist privileging of ‘cultural expertise’ to unilaterally assert the primacy of scholarship in determining appropriate representations of Hinduism (<http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~witzel/witzelletter.pdf>). Following Witzel’s lead, other writers and groups opposing the textbook edits then meticulously began tracing and publicizing the links between the Hindu American groups involved in the debate and hindutva organizations in India (Kurien 2007, p. 776).

In examples such as these, Zavos argues, multiculturalism serves to stabilize a certain “regulatory or disciplinary” authority on questions of representing Hinduism. In its uncertainty “over the place of minority religiosity [in] secular society, multiculturalism opens up spaces for the forthright expression of religious certainty” (2008, pp. 325,

327).⁸ Zavos is cautious about linking diasporic community interest in disciplining public images of Hinduism specifically with organized hindutva, but for Kurien the argument is much more straightforward: multiculturalist policies reinforce Hindu nationalism (2004, p. 376). Hindutva organizations' "Hinduism under siege" message, she writes, is "particularly attractive to Hindus in the United States who become a racial, religious and cultural minority upon immigration," have to contend with the negative, stereotypical, orientalist perceptions of Hinduism, and thus coalesce "to counter their relative invisibility within American society" (2006, pp. 725–6). 'Religion' acts as a foil to 'race', Rajagopal adds, such that "culturally congenial" assertions of diasporic identity come ironically into alignment with nationalist and even anti-U.S. politics in India, facilitating both moral and financial support (1997, p. 58). The result is that "multiculturalist Hindu" and "Hindu nationalist" are discursively and practically intertwined; the very genteel pluralism that diasporic communities use to secure official recognition the "multiculturalist table" is the very one that also legitimizes nationalist militancy (Kurien 2004; see also Jaffrelot & Therwath 2009; Lal 1999; Mathew & Parshad 2000).

Yet, the question of how closely diasporic Hinduism and hindutva are associated is perhaps not so easily settled. Raj warns of reading pro-Hindu stances as innately revivalist (2000), and Zavos distinguishes organized Hindutva from its broader ideological inflections, not straightforwardly bound by the Sangh Parivar's organizational discipline (2010). Perhaps because these grey areas of influence are widening, writers and activists working in the wake of the California textbook debate, and others, too, have found it imperative to definitively map the links between Hindu organizations in diaspora and Sangh organizations in India and elsewhere. A 2002 report by the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate, for instance, charged the Maryland-based India Development Relief Fund (IDRF) with funnelling funds to hindutva groups that they then also associated with the 2002 Gujarat riots, under its non-sectarian guise. A parallel report by the UK organization, Awaaz—South Asia Watch (2004) similarly held Sewa International responsible for using 'development' as a cover to raise funds for Hindu sectarian activities from unsuspecting donors. Charities like the IDRF and Sewa International have to maintain a certain "tactical distance" from organized hindutva in order to steer a legal course in the US and the UK, argue Jaffrelot and Therwath (2009, p. 283), who also read their non-sectarianism as essentially disingenuous. Zavos, however, offers an alternate reading: "the presence of Hindu nationalist inflections in image rights campaigning," he writes, "is evidence that these ideas are diffused beyond the institutional form of the Sangh" and are being articulated in a "sophisticated multiculturalist key" (2008, p. 334). Within India, too, Simpson gestures toward hindutva organizations' "selective affinities" when he asks, with reference to the Kachch earthquake of early 2001: how we are to understand the "the relationship between the Sangh Parivar and the host of religious organisations that carry out [humanitarian] work in its shadow"? Or, further, how we are to classify those "Vaishnava sects whose fundamental religious principles strongly resemble the basis of the Hindutva agenda," for whom there was a "groundswell of support"? (Simpson 2004, p. 143). Understanding hindutva in purely genealogical terms—that is, attempting to identify that which is "Unmistakably Sangh" (as the CSFH does in a later report on the Hindu Student Council) and that which recognizably is not—artificially cordons off the phenomenon in an effort to politically contain it.⁹ In reality, however, as even the CSFH's own assertion that hindutva takes non-sectarian cover in ideologies like development inadvertently indicates, it is increasingly difficult to pin-point where hindutva logics begin and end (Reddy forthcoming a,b).

Inflections

Identifying hindutva's arms and the extent of their "reach" (Bose 2008, p. 19) is undoubtedly a useful tool of political critique, symptomatic of a time when the global hunt for Al-Qaeda and its many arms has reached a pitch. This approach, however, elides recognition of the processes by which hindutva also generates "homologies" and becomes a somewhat dispersed set of logics that more-and-less subtly inflect public debate (Rajagopal 2001, p. 2; Zavos 2008, p. 334), thereby opening up spaces of alignment, affinity, and contestation.¹⁰

Two conceptual processes can help us to understand the means by which hindutva logics interpellate such identifications. The first is "visibilization": the

process by which 'subterranean' group identities become visible within a range of wider public spheres, possibly as the result of the actions of state agencies [...], the dynamic development of identities within particular groups, wider political events, or, most likely, a combination of these three factors (Zavos 2008, p. 328).

The second is "vernacularization", a term coined by Hansen (1996) and defined by Michelutti thus: the gradual moulding of overarching ideologies like hindutva (or democracy) by "folk understandings of 'the political'," and the methods by which these ideologies becomes "embedded in particular cultural and social practices ... entrenched in the consciousness of ordinary people" (Michelutti 2007, pp. 642, 639). Writings on these processes suggest they are complementary and interlocking. On the one hand communities rise in response to a call, whether clearly one to build a Rama temple or to protest the use of Hindu icons on Cavalli underwear, claiming their right to visibility and recognition in contested multicultural and multiethnic political landscapes. On the other, "various refractions of the [hindutva] nationalist agenda [are] grafted onto the rural landscape," made relatable to local realities and loyalties, claimed by particular communities to their own ends with varying degrees of success, and either diluted or reinvigorated in the process (Simpson 2004, p. 146; cf. also Brass 2003; Fuller 2001; Frøystad 2005; Kanungo 2003; Sen 2007; Shani 2007). Hindutva becomes normalized partly because its development, educational, reconversion and other schemes are implemented by state agencies, non-governmental organizations, formally and informally organized groups alike, in so many quotidian ways (Sud 2007, pp. 132–3).

Scholars writing about hindutva vernacularization have characterized it variously, suggesting that it manifests differently depending on local environments. Gérard Toffin writes of the Krishna Pranami sect in Nepal as finding affinities with mainstream hindutva by becoming more orthodox and traditionalist, and yet retaining a historical commitment to reformism. As RSS/VHP ideologies become part of the embattled monarchy's defence against democratization, the sect finds common ground with hindutva in the commitment to *seva* and the propensity to missionize: "convert new disciples to their ideas and establish networks for this purpose" (Toffin 2011). Zoya Hasan similarly describes the pragmatics of the farmers' movement in UP, which, in the absence of any other enduring basis, converges with hindutva by propagating undifferentiated notions of community as "rural-not-urban" and "Hindu-not-Muslim" (1994, p. 189).

In contrast to this sense of parallel processes serendipitously intersecting, Froerer's work amongst adivasis in Chattisgarh adopts a more top-down approach: "the successful spread of Hindu nationalism in this area," she argues, "whilst informed by local economic and political tensions and relations, is due principally to the RSS supporters' active involvement and exploitation of these tensions for nationalist ends" (2006, p. 42). Berti's

research on the history-writing initiatives of the RSS-affiliated *Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna* (ABISY) in Chandigarh reminds us then of “the gap between [hindutva’s] ideological programme and the way this programme is concretely implemented when it reaches people at grass-root levels” (2007, p. 9). Issues central to hindutva at the national level (such as the Aryan Invasion Theory) are selected specifically to “[fit] in well” with local cultural contexts—making it difficult to differentiate “what has been directly influenced by Hindutva from what is due to different and sometimes longstanding processes of reattaching local lore to a wider textual-based tradition” (Berti 2007, p. 11). But then again, even as “the ABISY’s ideological vision of Indian history [...] melts and becomes mixed up with pre-existent conceptions,” it also “encounters local forms of resistance” that do not always pit the ‘communal’ against the ‘secular’ in the manner of national-level discourses (Berti 2007, pp. 12, 32).

Fuller makes a complementary point in this account of the Vinayaka Chaturti festival in Tamil Nadu which, although clearly indicative of hindutva’s permeation and normalization in the state, also points to the ways in which the hindutva project remains unevenly successful in local contexts: not always dominated by the Hindu Munnani, and sometimes a religious and cultural celebration that lacks overt communal undertones (2001). Further, Michelutti’s account of the normalization of hindutva in the Yadav community underscores the processes by which Sanskritization (lower caste adoption of ‘higher’ forms of Hinduism, including practices associated with hindutva) have fostered the elaboration of ethnicist discourses that run counter to, and provide an alternative to, Hindu nationalist politics (2011; see also Michelutti 2008). In this instance, hindutva is quite far from being hegemonic but nonetheless serves as a critical political measure, selectively and instrumentally appropriated in the furtherance of vernacular interests—a point Adeney confirms in her comment that regional parties like the Tamil Nadu AIADMK seek to “out-BJP the BJP” by taking anti-conversion stances or refusing to condemn the violence in Gujarat (Adeney 2005, p. 114). In sum, then, whether we see hindutva as aggressively “infiltrat[ing]” local contexts and displacing local diets and lineages, slowly percolating into vernacular politics to allow for the emergence of alternative ethnic identities, or (naturally/partially) aligning in empathy with local concerns, it is increasingly evident that “the prism of the region” significantly refracts the conception and construction of national ideologies like hindutva (Bénéï 2001, p. 196).¹¹

Although it is ironically not highlighted, visibilization is inevitably a process many of these studies reference. As much as hindutva ideas melt and dissolve into local milieus, the processes by which this happens invariably interpellate and politicize, drawing new communities and newly coalesced interests from margin to centre. Tillin describes the role of the BJP in the formation of the state of Jharkhand in 2000, as one that helped draw local social movements into pre-eminence—even as the “emergent consensus between civil society activists and political parties around the idea of statehood concealed fundamental conflicts and ambiguities surrounding the meaning of statehood” (2011, pp. 80–1). There are several further examples: a “little known and avowedly eclectic devotional community” in remote West Wales becomes a “politically engaged ‘Hindu’ organization mounting a legal challenge to the policies of the Welsh government, and winning supporters from as far away as India, Russia, USA, Japan, New Zealand and Switzerland” (Warrier 2009, p. 261), vernacular Gujarati narratives of ‘Hindu hurt’ paradoxically gain legitimacy within the frameworks of British multiculturalism (Mukta 2000), and a marginal character in the Ramayana called Shabari is ‘rehabilitated’ by the Sangh Parivar and majestic temple in her honour built in the Dangs (Kanungo & Joshi 2009). The process of visibilization can also involve decentering: Yadav identity coalesces

around the muscular hero-god turned Krishna cults in a lower caste answer to hindutva that emulates as much as it resists (Michelutti 2011), and local devotees' acceptance of the pro-hindutva argument that the Kullu god Jamlū is Jamadagni (a Vedic rishi) underscores not nationalist aspiration but desire to accord *him* greater prestige (Berti 2007, p. 31). In this sense, visibilization is not just complementary to, but is also a consequence of, the vernacularization of hindutva.

Conclusion

Looking thus through the twin lenses of vernacularization and visibilization, it becomes possible to follow hindutva logics as they inflect local practice, generating not so much a straightforward and now nearly clichéd 'Hindu rashtra', as Sud (2007) suggests, but a widening field of fine-grained and intense contestation. Taken as a whole, the literature describing the local operationalizations of hindutva urge us to view it from both ends—as a politics that has always vizibilized local interests in the most saleable and relevant vernacular idioms, and inserted these into prevailing national(ist) narratives. Vernacularization places hindutva in a continuum that extends downwards, moving from ideology to local praxis, but the point is equally that hindutva arises in moments when it is autonomously appropriated by local groups, drawing Hindu belief, caste politics, and community interests into wider, national, political trajectories. As hindutva's inflections and influences thus expand to grassroots and diasporic contexts, mediated by discourses of rights, development, and cultures of multiculturalist ethnic assertions, so also does it become clearer just how much hindutva becomes a *mediating* discourse in its own right—drawn upon by hindutva ideologues, critics, scholars, empathizers, sympathizers, apologists and mere affiliates, each positioning themselves vis-à-vis hindutva or deploying it strategically to make their own claims. Whether as diffuse logic, clearly articulated ideological programme, or even the ideology that defines what it means to write in a "non-ideological way" (Berti 2007, p. 29), hindutva's role in thus providing vocabularies, templates, or critical points of reference for contemporary political praxis is both undeniable and increasingly impossible to isolate. If the hindutva that Savarkar or Golwalker once imagined exists at all, it exists as a set of tools, logics, and mechanisms by which contemporary politics at all levels plays out.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this point.

² Although I survey a range of important hindutva practices in this essay, hindutva as an ideology mobilized and, indeed, operationalized in the production of riots and violence deserves lengthier treatment than I can here afford. A focus on violence also reduces hindutva to key episodes and a heavily distilled ideology—when the literature under review here highlights just how irreducible hindutva otherwise is, both ideologically and in practice. I have elected to keep that focus discreet, for the moment. For some key accounts of the multiple factors involved in riots, the spatial geographies, logics, and gendered nature of violence etc.: Anand 2005; Brass 2003; Eckert 2009; Oza 2007; Shani 2007; Spodek 2008; Varshney 2002.

³ Quoted from “Recommendations of the National Education Conference convened by Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan” at New Delhi, August 28–30 1998; emphasis added. I have a copy of the report courtesy of the Surya Foundation in New Delhi.

⁴ But see Michelutti’s comments on Yadav methods of using history to prove mythological events (2011).

⁵ Indeed, the alignments produced by this debate were effectively reproduced in that over the 2005 revision of public school history textbooks in California (see Reddy forthcoming a). The questioning of scholarly authority had a further (diasporic) afterlife in the furious online debates on Jeffrey Kripal’s and Paul Courtright’s psychoanalyzing of Hindu deities and religious figures in their books, *Kali’s Child* and *Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* respectively.

⁶ Hindu Educational Foundation (HEF), Vedic Foundation (VF), and later the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials (CAPEEM).

⁷ Letter sent by the law office representing the Hindu American Foundation to Glee Johnson, President of the California State Board of Education, on February 21, 2006.

⁸ A similar attempt at disciplining Hinduism is evident in Indian debates over Deepa Mehta’s film, *Fire*, although here hindu(tva) critiques of the film are not sanctioned by a multiculturalist framework, and disciplinary authority becomes outright censorship (cf. Bose 2009; John & Niranjana 1999).

⁹ The CSFH’s report on the HSC can be found here: http://www.stopfundinghate.org/Unmistakably_Sangh.pdf. Padmaja Nair extends such questions even to the relationships between Sangh organizations, which can themselves be fragile, or strategic, marriages of convenience (2009, p. 63).

¹⁰ Indeed, Hinduism and Hindutva are not always natural homologies: Warrior’s study of the Mata Amritanandamaya Mission notes the co-existence of “right-wing interpretations of the Mata and her mission” alongside “others which refuse to see the Mata’s philosophy as anything but the most liberal, humanitarian, and universalistic”—refusing even the label ‘Hindu’ as a result (2005, pp. 126–7; cf. also Kim 2009; Nair 2009).

¹¹ Indeed, we could say that the multiple manifestations of vernacularized hindutva suggest a corrective to research which highlights the transformation of Hindu elements from a rich and diverse tradition into something far more aggressive, militarized, and homogenous in Hindutva politics (cf. Kapur 1993; Lutgendorf 1995; van der Veer 1988, 1995).

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