Hindu Nationalism: From Ethnic Identity to Authoritarian Repression

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Abstract
This article reflects on the relationship between Hindu nationalism and democracy and how the former emerges from within democracy only to subvert it. The essay outlines important conceptual issues in the relationship between Hindu nationalism and democracy, discusses the relationship between the idea of a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ and ‘Hindu Rajya’, and delves into the complex interplay between Hindu nationalism and caste. This article ultimately argues that Hindu nationalism’s alignment with authoritarianism in a political style does not simply corrode democracy, but it also undermines all values. The objective of this analysis is not to provide a comprehensive explanation of the rise of Hindu nationalism, as much as to reflect on the ways in which its ideology operates at multiple levels.

Keyword
India, Hindu nationalism, BJP, secularism, democracy, authoritarianism

Introduction
On 5 August 2020 Prime Minister Narendra Modi did the bhumi pujan (land worship) for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. This moment symbolically signalled the arrival of Hindu Rashtra. The grand spectacle of a regal of Narendra Modi performing the religious rites for the temple was, at a symbolic level, the recreation of an ancient ideal of kingship. Modi was not just consecrating the temple. He was enacting a new form of political power: A monarchical protector of the faith of the community performing one of the traditional functions of Hindu kingship, which was to consecrate and protect temples.

That moment also crystallized the project of Hindu nationalism and the transformation of Indian politics in the starkest terms. Every theme central to Hindu nationalism was present in the Prime Minister’s speech (The Indian Express, 2020). He signalled that Hindu nationalism is, in the first instance, constituted by a historical memory: a construction of victimhood, a sense of constantly having...
been subjugated by foreign invasion. For Hindu nationalism, the real and enduring colonial hurt is not British colonialism, but what they describe as Muslim invasions in the eight centuries prior to British rule in India. The restoration of the temple at site of the Babri Masjid that Hindu nationalists had razed to the ground, was akin to the independence of India. Perhaps it was even more significant since it was, as the Prime Minister described it, a culmination of hundreds of years of struggle. August 5th rather than August 15th was declared of equal significance in thinking of India’s independence. August 5th was significant in the longer arc of India’s civilizational history, the moment where a glorious but subjugated civilization finds its utterance. The Prime Minister emphasized that Indian history needs to be seen in these civilizational terms and the Ram temple was an epicentre of that civilizational imagination.

Religious leaders of different Hindu denominations from all across India were present, displaying a show of Hindu unity around Ram under the political auspices of the Prime Minister. Hinduism in complex ways has been a deeply connecting cultural thread across the geography of India. But here it was displaying the core ambition of Hindu nationalism: to collect these complex cultural threads and weave them into a political unity and display it in full might.

The moment was also a political vindication of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its associated family of organizations including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It was the culmination of the political and legal claims they had made since 1948 that this site belonged to Hindus, that the Babri Masjid that stood there was a usurpation, and that the Ramjanmabhoomi trust had legal title to the land. The Supreme Court judgement was in some ways as total a legal vindication of these claims as possible. It set aside the secularist argument that restoring status quo ante for events that may have happened in the sixteenth century was not an outlook befitting a modern secular state. It even set aside the Allahabad High Court’s Judgement, which at least had the flavour of a compromise for the sake of peace: dividing up the property, and building a mosque and temple side by side. The Supreme Court gave an order to find an alternative land for building a mosque, much outside the city limits of Ayodhya. And finally, in a lower Court decision, all those accused of conspiring to demolish the Babri Masjid, were acquitted. The Mosque had been demolished by a vigilante mob. But apparently no crime had been committed. After all, how could a movement that had been designated as freedom movement be punished?

This article is a rumination on the relationship between Hindu nationalism and democracy: on how it emerges from within democracy to ultimately subvert it. The aim of the article is to explicate what Hindu nationalism has done through the work of politics, its moral psychology and ruling style. It has four sections: The first section lays down some conceptual issues in the relationship between Hindu nationalism and democracy. The second section continues this discussion with a brief consideration of the relationship between Hindu nationalism and caste and language. The third section looks at nationalism’s transformation of Indian Constitutionalism, specifically its attempt to distinguish ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (nation) and ‘Hindu Rajya’ (state). Finally, I end with a discussion of Hindu nationalism’s alignment with authoritarianism in a political style that is not just corrosive of democracy, but of all values. The aim is not to provide a full explanation of the rise of Hindu nationalism, as much as a reflection on the way in which different levels of its ideology operate.

Hindu Nationalism and Democracy

In order to fully grasp the specific character of Hindu nationalism, it has to be placed in the long arc of political, cultural and legal transformations that have taken place in India since the nineteenth century (Zavos, 2000). Although the political triumph of the BJP has vastly intensified the threat of Hindu nationalism, as an ideological force, its fate transcends the fortunes of the BJP. It can also remain a
significant cultural and political current without manifesting itself in electoral politics. Its consolidation is a conjuncture of several strands, which reinforce each other.

Hindu nationalism is a product of a challenge internal to democracy. To put it simplistically, the story goes something like this. Post 1857, it became clear that India was going to adopt, albeit gradually, some form of democratic governance. For the first time, the Muslim elite in India found itself without political power. This set-in motion a complex politics about the Muslim political identity in India. It is in a democracy the framework of a majority and a minority acquires political significance. We can debate the nature of Hindu and Muslim political identity prior to the nineteenth century. But at a very basic level, once the concept of minority and majority in was accepted as the basic conceptual framing, with Muslims as a paradigm case of ‘minority’ a Hindu political identity is created almost by definition. The definition of a ‘religious minority’ made sense only against the idea of a ‘majority’ who might have posed a potential political threat to the minority; the two concepts co-created each other.

Every strand of politics that tried to think outside of the majority/minority framework was relegated to the margins. Two strands that could have been possible alternatives to the majority–minority framework. One was simply thinking in terms of equal individual rights and freedoms for all citizens, protected by constitutional guarantees that did not require thinking in terms of a permanent majority/minority framework in politics. But this strand, which could have taken a liberal form, was seen as an ‘anti-minority’ strand, because it aimed at dissolving the significance of group identities for political purposes. It did not, so to speak, take the problem of power sharing between groups qua groups seriously.

The second strand to dissolve the majority–minority framework was to pluralize the notion of ‘minority’. India has too many cross-cutting cleavages. It is a collection of minorities (Ambedkar, 1945). At a descriptive level, depending on the identity you choose to privilege, this might be true. But this move had its own political limitations. The first is that the idea of cross cutting cleavages of caste and region was never thought to be sufficient to displace the importance of ‘Muslim’ identity as a political category (Ambedkar, 1948). By the 1940s this was becoming clearer. Ironically, then the attempt to see India as a collection of minorities was then seen as a covert assault on Hindu identity; an attempt to deny that despite plurality, cross-cutting cleavages, regional and ideological variations, there could be such a thing as Hindu identity.

From 1857 to 1947, one of the challenges of democracy was framed as the sharing of power between Hindus and Muslims, through the representative process (Shaikh, 1989; Singh, 1987). But the problem was that there was never an equilibrium solution to the problem of power sharing, through the process of representation. If representation to minorities was given in excess to their numbers; or they were given ‘veto’ powers, the ‘majority’ felt aggrieved. If representation was not given in ways that gave minorities effective power, perhaps even a ‘veto’ on certain issues, they would feel disempowered. In a tragic irony, the negotiation over power sharing, increased rather than decreased the gulf between the political leadership of the two communities in two ways. It reinforced the premise that the communities had some distinct interests that could not be adequately protected through a language of individual rights and common citizenship. And it probably failed to build trust, and put the communities in a competitive dynamic in relation to each other. It also highlighted the fact that emphasizing strands of ‘common culture’, the emergence of a civilization that had the imprint of all religions on it, was pretty weak gruel with which to combat an actual political problem of power sharing. Appeals to shared culture cannot be an answer to the problem of political power sharing.

After partition, the question of power sharing between Hindus and Muslims through the formal process of representation was put off the agenda. But in an informal way, the argument continued through the electoral process. It was important to Congress self-image that it be seen as representative
of Muslim interests at any rate. Until 2014, it was almost an article of faith that any ruling dispensation in Delhi would require either the electoral support of Muslims, or of parties that claimed to respond to their interests. In some senses, the mathematics of the electoral system would provide the conduit by which Muslim interests were protected. Political coalitions would, given the fragmented nature of Indian politics, seek out electoral support of Muslims. It led to creation of what might be called ‘electoral secularism’, where parties had no particular concern about representing or empowering Muslims, but needed them to forge electoral coalitions. This kind of minimal political responsiveness was quite compatible with social, political and economic marginalization of Muslims. The Congress, secular parties and the Indian State were Janus faced. On one hand, they were symbolically solicitous towards Muslims, by selectively directing benefits that protected their identity interests: protecting minorities from some forms of targeted violence, overturning judicial scrutiny of personal laws, or preventing Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* from being circulated, for example. On the other hand, the same parties could also selectively benefit from targeted communal violence at the local level, often to reinforce the message that Muslims could not rely on the rule of law, but needed the discretionary protection of the state.

This created a vicious circle: the less Muslims could acknowledge public economic and political life as their own, the more they fell behind other communities on a range of empowerment indicators. But the more they fell behind, and were alienated, the more it was used as a sign against them; they were figured as a community singularly uncooperative when it came to integrating into India’s modernity. In the case of Muslims, the resources of the state, when they were directed towards them, were meant to reinforce their status as a distinct minority, not to fully empower them in the political process. Muslims remained locked in a dilemma not quite of their own making. The more Muslim leadership (which in its lack of political imagination was willing to oblige those who were constructing them as a supplicant minority), emphasized their status as a minority, the more the conditions were created for a majoritarian backlash. On the other hand, the wider political culture was doing its best to prevent Muslim integration into wider society, in the same breath as it was demanding it. This account is a simplification, one that obscures the complex realities of Muslim politics in India. But the net result was the majority-minority framework got reinforced even more strongly in Indian politics (for splendid accounts of the complexity, see Ahmed, 2019; Wahab, 2021). Arguably with a significant Muslim political elite having migrated to Pakistan, elite level interaction of the two communities in common institutions was probably even less in the 70s and 80s than pre-partition India. The partitions of the mind were also becoming deeper sociological realities, allowing Hindu Nationalists to construct the ‘Muslim’ as an abstract figure, an object of suspicion. The deep roots of Hindu nationalism were not in the overt triumph of the BJP. It was in the covert commitment to deepening the majority/minority framework.

With this groundwork, it was just a matter of time when parties in the political system decided that Muslims might be electorally dispensable. The decisive came when the BJP decided that an electoral majority be cobbled without either relying on Muslim votes or the parties that supported them. Or more strongly, rejecting the need for the support of minorities or parties that supported them could actually help consolidate the majority vote. Muslims had been given a veto on Indian politics. The task was now to make them ‘irrelevant’. This is how the refrain in the BJP went. There were no longer any compulsions left for electoral secularism.

Hindu nationalism was, as Vinay Sitapati (2020) has pointed out, the idea that Hindus *qua* Hindus should never again lose political power in the Subcontinent. This combined two deeply modern impulses: a modern democratic obsession with a majority in numbers and the quest for a Hindu identity that could paper over all other differences of caste and region. The obsession with majoritarian power makes modern Hindu nationalism obsessed with demography in all its forms. Every single cause it
champions has demography at the heart of it: conversion is an attempt to alter demography; marriage outside the religion is an attempt to alter demography; differential birth rates in communities are not symptoms of uneven development, but a vast conspiracy to alter demography. Any special rights given to minorities, no matter how slight the burden they impose, are a violation of the laws of demography. They suggest the giving of power to a community beyond what its numbers warrant. The year 2014 was a watershed in this respect, for it showed that minorities could be made electorally irrelevant. While other political parties may not go so far as to target minorities, marginalizing them will become the default mode, the common sense of Indian politics. All parties will, to varying degrees, emphasize majority cultural privilege.

But the project ensuring the political domination of the Hindu majority was enabled by a set of processes that have their own autonomous logic. Hindu majoritarianism has a legal logic. In the nineteenth century ‘Hindu’ began to become a consolidated legal identity as a result of two processes: the process of codification and the process of reform. The logic of imperial rule, was to govern communities partly indirectly, through what they understood to be their own systems of personal law. But these systems of law began to be codified in new ways in the nineteenth century, partly as a result of the British need to understand and administer these laws. But the process of codification itself created a more homogenous legal identity for Hindus—or even more broadly for Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs, who were grouped under a single legal identity largely to contrast it with Muslim and Christian personal law. But the process of social reform, the slow correction of caste and gender injustices in these traditional systems of law by the state, meant that the state and the legal identities of the communities got increasingly entangled (Larson, 2002; Menski, 2008). When the state enacted reforms of Hindu law, it was performing a dual function. On one hand it was acting as a modern state trying to nudge Hindu law into reform. It was able to do that because of the organizational character of Hinduism. With no central authority, no central text, the only ways in which Hindus could settle their need for reform was through democratic institutions, which happened to be institutions of the state. The Indian State was acting not just as a secular state reforming Hindu law, it was acting as a State of the Hindus who were, collectively through its institutions reforming their own laws. This applied even to matters of temple administration, for example, where the state could take over, reform administer and supervise the running of temples. The spectre of a secular state, managing thousands of temples, through properly organized government departments, is an anomaly from the point of view of secularism (Smith, 1953). The distinction that the state manages the secular aspects of the temple and not its religious aspects can be hard to maintain. Hindu nationalism is partially correct that liberals sometimes worry too little about the statism implicit in the state running temples.

But the Hindutva narrative, that this phenomenon is another instance of the state victimizing Hindus, is exaggerated myth making. No Hindu’s religious worship has been impeded. The histories of the management of specific temples and state endowment acts vary. But broadly speaking, there was a genuine conundrum over who has sovereign rights over the administration of historically significant temples. Temples were ritual scaffoldings for maintaining kingship; the king in turn, while leaving theological matters to priests, was responsible for management oversight. As kingship dissolved, the question was who would step in for that management role? The answer was other Hindus, but now through the democratic mechanisms of the state. This is not an instance of the state exercising sovereignty over Hindus; it is Hindus collectively governing their temples through new mechanisms. So the campaign to rescue temples is not about rescuing Hindus from the State. Hindu temples are run by Hindus. There is also an irony here which underscores the entanglement of state and Hindu identity. It is actually the state’s systematization of temple management the created a consolidated legal identity for Hindu temples in the first place.
But arguably, it is this consolidation of Hindu legal identity in and through the state, that achieves one of the central aims of Hindu nationalism; it is work already done by the process of modernization in India. But this consolidation also raised another question. If democratic institutions of the state, parliaments, and state legislatures were going to be the forums through which Hindus would govern their legal identity, and undertake the process of reform, what is the relationship of these institutions to minorities and their legal identities? Did parliament have exactly the same authority to reform personal laws of other communities? Formally, in a constitutional sense it does. But politically the answer was always fudged. Would a parliament exercising authority over Muslim Personal Law or Wakf Boards be an instance of a majority exercising power over a minority? Or would it be an instance of a secular parliament exercising authority in these matters over all communities, as it should? (Chatterjee, 2008). Hindu nationalism accused the secular state of acting in bad faith: acting as if it had only jurisdiction over Hindus. So, the process of Hindu legal consolidation through the democratic state led to the emergence of a Hindu legal identity. But is also allowed that identity to play victim by claiming that the state had asymmetrically exercised authority over the majority.

This bland rendering of the political project of Hindu nationalism does not of course do justice to the underlying furies that fuel it. At the core of its sensibility is the idea of victimhood, and the community of memory required to nourish that sense of victimhood. Hindus are perpetual victims, a status that can be overcome only by consolidating Hindu political power. They were first the victims of Islamic invasions, which Hindu nationalism sees as one monolith subjugating Hindus. Then they were victims of British colonialism that at one stroke invalidated all the knowledge claims of a rich and complex civilization. They were then victims of the Nehruvian State. Hindu nationalism sees its marginalization at the hands of the Nehruvian State as an even deeper affront, because it was marginalization at the hands of a state where power was in Hindu hands. The vehemence against the Nehruvian State is even deeper than against the British State, not just for the obvious reason that the Congress Party is still an active political force, and the attack on Nehru is also an attack on its provenance. The Nehruvian State is seen as an act of multiple betrayal of Hindus. It was not a state that in the dominant discourses of the time, which could even acknowledge the reality of past Hindu subjugation; it actively repressed these popular memories and narratives. It presented Medieval India as a tale of the emergence of a syncretic civilization rather than seeing it for what it was: an era of conflict and Hindu subjugation, which a few episodes of liberalty and syncretic patronage could not negate (Dasgupta, 2019; Naipaul, 1988). The mistake of the Nehruvian imagination was that it played on the territory that Hindu nationalism wanted to play: the territory of history. For a secular nation it was important to tell the history of the past as a secular history. The problem with this move was that it was always going to be empirically contestable. It also legitimized the idea that beliefs about the past or debates in historiography have to serve the function of legitimating present political identities (Bhattacharya, 2008). It provided less space to acknowledge a history of conflict, and believe at the same time that a new social contract has been written, in which past conflicts are irrelevant. The larger debate about the lens through which India’s past is understood will remain an animating impulse on Hindu nationalism.

But it would be a mistake to see the BJP as a return to the past. In some ways its reconfiguration of Hinduism is as profound as its attack on Indian Constitutionalism. While it adopts the cultural grammar of Hinduism, its main interests are neither religiosity, culture theology or the deep variety and capaciousness of Hinduism. Its main interest is the construction of a unified ethnic identification with Hindutva. The core of this identity is the sense of victimhood, and acquiring political power over other communities. The victimhood has a number of tropes, in addition to a sense of being historically colonized. It is reinforced by partition, the vivisection of India’s sacred geography. It was then reinforced...
by the perception that the Nehruvian State, in its fidelity to constitutional values and its concern to prevent further political violence after partition, was simply not pushing the logic of partition to its ultimate conclusion. The truth is it is hard to argue that Hindus or Hinduism were victimized by the state in post-independence India. But victimhood narratives of nationalism just need pivotal and symbolic events on which to hang onto the psychological comforts of victimhood. And the state did oblige them from time to time. For example, the Shah Bano case, the expulsion of Kashmiri Pandits, the global discourse on terrorism, and the alleged marginalization of Indian knowledge systems were all strung in a narrative of victimhood.

This kind of victimhood is that requires a perpetual diet to nourish it. Which is why Hindu nationalism will not rest content with settling a limited set of issues. For instance even after the triumph at Ayodhya, the matter of reclaiming sites on which Mosques were built is not a closed matter, as the demands for Kashi and Mathura indicate. The purpose of reclaiming these shrines is not religiosity. The purpose of claiming it back is to claim that Hindus have power qua Hindus and they can now show Muslims their place. It is to use a sacred place of worship as a weaponized tool against another community (Mohan, 2008).

**Congress, Caste and Hindu Nationalism**

Hindu nationalism is, in some senses, born with the modern Indian democratic project. It is not an aberration, but accompanies it like a shadow. It can operate within the uneasy secular political settlement of 1950, just as easily as it can decide to smash it open. The only question is what are the conditions under which the shadow becomes long enough to ominously darken the horizon of democracy? A full analysis of what enabled the rise of the BJP would require a more complex analysis of the conjunction in 2014 and 2019: the economic context, global political trends, changing preferences of Indian capital more willing lean on authoritarian repression, the nuts and bolts of political organization, the availability of new information technologies and many other contextual factors. But two points are worth making in a way that speak centrally to Hindu nationalism’s complex connection with forms of democratic empowerment.

The rise of the BJP was facilitated by the decline of the Congress, which arguably declined due to its own internal contradictions (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019). In the 1970s, Congress crafted the first major legitimization of the RSS by declaring the Emergency. There was some support for the Emergency in the RSS, but it was the anti-Congress front during the Emergency that rehabilitated the RSS. In the 1980s, Congress’ dalliance with Hindu nationalism in the 1980s alienated minorities; its undemocratic party structures did now allow it to incorporate newly mobilized political groups like Dalits into its fold. It managed to come to power in 2004, and then in 2009 as the head of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) alliance. But it could not use the decade in power to regenerate the party. From 2004 to 2009, it had a remarkable economic record, and made even modest steps towards regenerating institutions of the state. But in its second term it could not shake off the charge of being a closed plutocracy. The BJP’s victory in 2014 itself took place against an overwhelming concern with plutocracy. The anti-corruption movement, which now turns out to have been a fifth column of the BJP, delegitimized the Congress and the BJP stepped into the breach. An honest introspection requires us to concede that the Left was right in pointing out the destruction Modi could bring. But, equally, it must be conceded that India’s ancien régime had also been so delegitimized that it was bound to collapse, in the absence of serious party and leadership reform. The Congress had a governance record it could build on; but the party had no will for institutional regeneration left. The BJP managed to convert anti-Congressism into an effective political
syndrome, where the contempt for Congress far trumps their fear of anything else. In this sense, a consistent and thorough going anti-Congressism is the *bête noire* of Hindu nationalism.

The second element is the complex sociology of identity politics, especially caste politics, in India. Until the early 2000s, the BJP was identified, both in sociological and ideological terms, as an upper caste party, channelling upper caste resentment. But a number of developments transformed the character of the party.

Caste politics in the eighties and nineties were characterized by two features. The first was that the arithmetic of caste itself was indeed important—a lot of political strategizing was about the creation of political majorities through caste coalitions. Think of the Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim (KHAM) alliances in Gujarat for example. The second was the assertion of new forms of agency amongst caste groups through agglomeration into self-conscious political forces: think of the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) for example, channelling, Other Backward Class (OBC) and Dalit identities. These parties were major elements in alliances that governed India. Caste is still a significant factor in Indian politics, but its character began to change in ways that the BJP was quick to grasp.

But there is a curious kind of ambivalence that attends caste politics in India. On one hand, taking caste into account is absolutely necessary for understanding social, economic and political power structures in India. It could be an agent of the deepening of democracy. But on the other hand, it raises the spectre of politics being largely majoritarian identity politics in different form—where the majority is a coalition of caste identities. For secular parties, extolling caste-based mobilization became a kind of mantra. The idea was that these cross-cutting cleavages of caste would prevent the consolidation of a more unified Hindu political identity; Mandal would prevent Mandir. But this valorisation of caste politics, paradoxically, created the conditions for the rise of the BJP. As Rajni Kothari, had presciently argued, caste politics had the potential of consolidating Hindu nationalism. The mechanism of this consolidation would not be, as many thought, just the consolidation of an upper caste constituency behind the BJP (though that might happen). The mechanism of the consolidation would be subtler. Caste politics would pretty much expose the ideological bankruptcy of all political formations; it would legitimize foregrounding identity politics and it would allow the BJP to make the argument that it stood for a larger national interest, not merely for the particularisms of caste or sectional interests (Kothari, 1992). If the electoral contest was constructed in the final analysis as a coalition of ‘sectional interests’ versus ‘national interest’, rather than competing versions of it, guess which will win in the long term? It is another matter that Rajni Kothari himself also fell victim to the comforting fiction that merely a collection of caste interests could stop the BJP.

But the BJP did not so much as do away with caste politics, but subtly and fairly effectively repositioned it within a Hindutva framing, keeping on board its social justice impulses, while enlisting it in a larger identity. In part it was able to do this because of the availability of a leader who could do this more credibly. Narendra Modi’s personal biography, as a leader who did not come from privileged circumstances in economic or social terms, allowed the possibility of sections of marginalized groups identifying with him in a way that would have been impossible a decade ago. The vote concentration of the BJP amongst the upper castes is still the higher than amongst any other group, but Narendra Modi allowed the BJP to expand its social base quite dramatically.

The BJP also recognized that caste mobilization in part required a focal point, and the focal point was reservations. In the 1980s, upper caste support to the BJP was prompted by the hope that it would oppose reservations. But the BJP neutralized the issue politically by embracing the social justice logic of reservations, thus taking it off the political agenda, and paving the way for OBCSs, SCs and STs not opposing it. It also realized that there were exogenous developments taking place within the politics of caste. From the eighties onwards, the logic of caste political mobilization had been, what might be
called agglomerative. Parties like the BSP, SP, and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) were consolidating different *jatis* (castes) into an agglomerative political consciousness defined by larger categories like Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST). But this strategy had run its course. With rolling back of reservations now off the agenda, there was no focal point for this mobilization. But the internal differentiation of these groups also caught up with the politics of caste. Partly as a result of economic growth and some occupational change, different subcastes were differently positioned to gain benefits from reservation or from economic growth more generally. This greater internal differentiation, made the agglomerative logic of caste movements more difficult to sustain. Now the logic was pointing towards deagglomeration—distributing benefits within these caste formations, through sub-quotas for instance. This allowed the BJP to wean away particular subgroups within these otherwise potent caste formations. Larger economic and cultural changes are slowly disembedding voters from fixed social formations and making them available for new forms of mobilization (Narayan, 2021).

The faith that caste politics would be the antidote to Hindutva ironically made the Centre and even the Left in India more sociologically deterministic. The BJP, on the other hand, has a generative conception of identity. Identities can be reconfigured through the work of propaganda, outreach, providing services and political mobilization. It also understands that political violence can alter political identifications by creating the conditions where one identity can be suddenly made more salient. It also has the advantage of organizations like the RSS, whose agenda is certainly electoral. But it is also more than electoral. It is to bring about a long-term cultural shift in people’s default identifications, to *generate* new forms of identification which might not have existed. On this front, the BJP’s ground strategy has been long term, subtle, and more effective. Two recent books on the BJP document this in full measure. Tariq Thachil (2014), for example, argued that the social service wings of the BJP were responsible for creating almost a silent revolution in generating new forms of identification with the BJP by providing services. and Arkotang Longkumer’s brilliant book, *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the North East* (2020), also makes a similar argument about the BJP’s unlikely success in the Northeast. There in addition to providing services, making themselves part of the cultural fabric, the RSS tapped into local memories of victimization and violence to create new identities.

The lazy assumption that caste would check Hindutva was a product of a sociological imagination that did not understand either caste or Hindutva. As Ambedkar had presciently argued, in part it is caste division that necessitates the search for an external enemy for unifying Hinduism (though, in fairness, there is almost no collective identity that is not sustained by positing an external enemy). There is no a priori reason to suppose that Dalit or OBCs would not, if conditions were right, participate in the Hindutva project, including its violence. It also underestimates the degree to which the RSS has worked to shed at least some of its upper caste baggage. The party and organizational hierarchy may still reflect vestiges of upper caste dominance. But these vestiges are, in all likelihood less onerous than those of the Congress party which, for all its symbolic commitment to social justice, pretty much remained a party in which the traditional hierarchies of caste were reproduced in subtler forms. The Congress treatment of Ambedkar’s intellectual legacy is a case in point. The sociologist M. N. Srinivas had in almost Brahminical vein argued that there were two competing models through which traditional caste social mores would be overcome: Westernization or Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1962). It was always assumed that the BJP or RSS would prefer Sanskritization: the imbuing of high caste sensibilities and mores in the general population. While this still remains an ambition for Hindu nationalism, it has in practice settled for something more capacious: Ethnicization. This simply involves identifying as a Hindu in demographic terms, and becoming part of the project of political Hindutva. It is compatible with a wider cultural grammar—which is why it has been so easy for the RSS to incorporate everything from local forms of worship of Dalit communities, to every member of the nationalist pantheon from Ambedkar to Vivekananda.
The one final element that has to be taken into considerations is the role of Hindi in the ideological imagination of the Hindu nationalism. In North India it is impossible to imagine the success of the BJP without taking into account the politics of Hindi. There is probably not much political appetite or cultural support for the imposition of Hindi, even in North India. But there is a profound sense that Hindi has been marginalized at least in terms of status. In the case of other vernacular languages, the demand for linguistic states allowed for a politics where language issues were front and centre. In the non-Hindi speaking regions, the political elite had to, in some senses identify with the vernacular. But in Hindi speaking areas, the sense of resentment that English was a marker of political privilege, that Hindi was no longer a conduit of knowledge production, or that one signalled status by a distance from Hindi is quite acute. This is why, even without the grand ambition of imposing Hindi on the rest of the nation, the question of the status of Hindi is not without political resonance. The marginalization of Hindi, always meant that there was room for a party to occupy that vernacular space. This is something the BJP did with aplomb in Uttar Pradesh (UP) In fact, one simpler explanation of Congress’ decline in UP is that it does not have even a handful speakers who can command an audience in Hindi. The marginalization of Hindi could then be mobilized as a sign of the marginalization of a whole vernacular culture.

Remaking India: Rashtra or Rajya?

It is a commonplace to argue that Hindu nationalism is a theory of the Nation, not a theory of the State. As RSS ideologues from Ram Madhav (2020) and Swadesh Singh (2019) like to put it liberal critics of Hindu nationalism do not get the distinction between Hindu Rashtra (nation) and Hindu Rajya. This claim starts with a plausible distinction: the concept of Hindu Rashtra speaks to concerns over membership and identity, not the character of the state and its allocation of rights. Liberal principles by themselves do not answer the question: who is considered to be a member of the state. The lack of a principled theory of membership has been the Achilles’ Heel of liberal constitutionalism since its inception. In practice, states uses a variety of criteria to grant membership: birth, ethnic identity, religious ties, and historical connections. States even use wealth and investment as a criteria to grant citizenship. Such discrimination in granting citizenship status is widely practised in all democracies.

The distinction between Hindu Rashtra and Hindu Rajya is meant to cleverly signal three things. First, that Hindu nationalism is no different from other nationalisms that are legitimized all over the world. Most nations in the world often appeal to potent principles of cultural unity. The basis of India’s unity is not simply an allegiance to constitutionalism; it requires recognition of our common identity as Hindus. The second is to signal that Hindu nationalism is not reactionary; it is a way of reassuring modernist Hindus that the project of producing cultural unity does not imply a regression to a religious or a theocratic state. In fact, a Hindu Rashtra can have as modern a state as it wants. The third is to reclaim the story of India’s identity and to posit the existence of a Hindu nation back into the deep recesses of India’s history, one that transcends the flow of time, the changes in political regimes, and the existence of social division.

But this distinction between a Hindu Rashtra and a Hindu Rajya is ultimately unsustainable. What it requires of citizens, especially minorities, is not just an allegiance to the terms of the social contract as set out in constitutional principles, or to the institutions and processes of the state. It requires everyone to acknowledge the symbols of Hindu unity, such as the sacredness of territory, the importance of symbols such as Ram, and the overall glory of Hindu civilization. But it also provides fertile ground creating a moving target of threats to this cultural unity. They are in some senses constructed as ‘enemies of the nation’, since by definition they do not subscribe to the Hindutva view of the nation.
This moving list can include minorities, especially Muslims. But it can also include liberals, leftists, those who might use caste as counterpoint to Hinduism, or those who simply want to define their identity on their own terms.

But where the distinction between Hindu Rashtra and the Hindu Rajya is blurred is that the enforcement of the script of nationalism requires the deployment of state power. The project of Hindu Rashtra is articulated, enforced, and propagated through the aegis of the State. The project of Hindu Rashtra cannot be realized without the state curbing freedoms or in some cases institutionalizing discrimination.

Recent developments clearly show how facile this distinction between Hindu Rashtra and Hindu Rajya is. The laying of the foundation stone at Ayodhya was both the apotheosis of Hindu Rashtra, but also its alignment with state power through majoritarian assertion. The Citizenship Amendment Act and accompanying discussion on the National Register for Citizens made explicit the idea of India as a homeland for Hindus. The purpose of the Citizenship Amendment Act was to grant persecuted minority refugees from neighbouring states a fast track to citizenship status. This aim was reasonable enough. But the Act enshrined a principle of religious discrimination in India law by excluding the possibility that persecuted Muslims could also seek citizenship through this particular law. The surrounding political discourse raised the spectre of creating a National Register of Citizens where all citizens would be asked to prove their citizenship. But everyone understood that this process would involve a differential burden of proof for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Several states are enacting what are now known as ‘love jihad’ laws. Many states already had laws regulating religious conversion. But the new laws break new ground. Amongst other things, they require a two month notice to the state before any religious conversion can take place. They shift the burden of proof on the citizen to demonstrate that their conversion is not a result of force or fraudulent means. They allow the annulment of marriages where the state comes to the conclusion that the objective of the marriage was to convert the woman. In effect, the purpose of these laws is to severely discourage interfaith marriages. These laws are an incredible infringement on individual freedom and give the state the power to regulate the most consequential and intimate choices human beings make about their own lives.

But these laws illustrate that the distinction between Hindu Rashtra and Hindu Rajya is bogus. These laws alter the character of the Indian State, not just the character of the Indian Nation. The function of the state now is to give expression to the core anxieties of the Hindu Rashtra. It gives expression to the vilest ideological trope in Hindu nationalism, of young Muslim men, being a threat to the nation, since they might seduce helpless Hindu women. This idea has moved from being a cultural trope to being the basis of state policy. One can multiply examples. Many states had cow protection laws. Cow protection, like personal laws, has always been one of the many ambiguous compromises the Indian Constitution the secular state made with religious identities. There are attempts to justify cow protection on secular grounds, but there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the ban on cow slaughter is underpinned by the ideology of Hindu Rashtra.

The distinction between Hindu Rashtra and Hindu Rajya had a degree of plausibility for two reasons. First, so far Hindu nationalism has sought legitimation through electoral means; indeed on some accounts it is committed to electoral democracy since that is a conduit of majoritarian power. Second, it has also positioned itself as not so much establishing a Hindu Rajya, but completing the unfinished constitutional business of partition. So, for example, it can in principle, present the scrapping of Article 370 in Kashmir, or the project for a common civil code as stemming, not from any conception of a Hindu Rajya, but from the values inherent in the Indian Constitution. This is Indian constitutionalism finding the courage of its own convictions. There could be a plausible case made on these lines. But this is not quite what Hindu
nationalism is up to when using state power. These are mere pretexts to show majoritarian assertion. For instance, the normative case for the abolition of triple talaq, on liberal grounds is quite strong. The BJP brought legislation to this effect. But by criminalizing, and not merely invalidating triple talaq, the BJP not just wanted to reform; it also wanted to use the case to stigmatize Muslims. A possible case could be made for scrapping Article 370. But doing it, while at the same time partitioning Jammu and Kashmir without the consent of the Assembly and, for the first time in Independent India’s history, downgrading the state, and depriving its citizens of civil rights, was again meant to be a show of majoritarian power. Incidentally, the subtle majoritarian assertion on federalism is manifest in the fact there every proposal to divide the one state that needs to be broken down into smaller states, UP (which has a population the size of Brazil), is shot down for fear of creating a state in western UP, where Muslims might, because of the demography, be able to exercise more representative power than they do in a large state.

I want to use one more illustration to show that concept of ‘Rajya’ cannot be delinked from ‘Rashtra’. India’s free speech jurisprudence has always been fraught with inconsistencies. It has to be admitted that the politics of free speech was in part shaped by interpretations of Section 295 of the Indian Penal Code, which gives the state the power to ban speech that intentionally offends religion. This has functioned as a version of blasphemy law in India. It was first enacted by the Punjab Legislative Assembly, in response to the Rangila Rasool case, a book that was an offensive depiction of the Life of Muhammad. The detailed history of the applications of section 295 need not detain us here. But the political dynamic of the section is interesting. It encourages political mobilization on behalf of censorship, since you know there is already an acceptance of the principle, and you can expect the government to respond. In a society comprised of different group identities, this identity has a competitive dynamic. If you have three religious communities ‘X’, ‘Y’ and ‘Z’, and if a piece of art or novel offensive to ‘X’ is censored, ‘Y’ and ‘Z’ will also often measure their recognition of their community identity by asserting similar claims. If offensive novels or cartoons about the Prophet Mohammed can be proscribed, why not about Basavanna, Shivaji or Nanak? If Satanic Verses can be deemed offensive why not the Kannada novel Dharamkaarana? Communities begin to measure their power—and comparative self-esteem—by what they can silence or have banned. It is striking in the politics of censorship, how little people are interested in theology or ideas. But the idea is to provoke a demand for censorship or retaliation by a community to put them in bad light or stigmatize them. In the politics of free speech, Hindu nationalism argues, it is the assertion of community power, not just legal standards that have governed the regulation of speech. This is an area, where the state was also accused of giving minorities a veto—the claim was that Indian free speech jurisprudence has not had the courage to be liberal in order to accommodate Muslim concerns over Mohammed. Again, there might be a plausible liberal argument to be made here. But Hindu nationalism uses this as a pretext not to expand the boundaries of free speech but to expand the circumference of offense (Mehta, 2015).

The Indian state’s track record of impartial dispensation of justice after communal riots has always been patchy. The judicial and investigative aftermath of the horrible pogroms of 1984 and 2002 are the most striking examples of this dismal failure. Riot and terror investigations have often been commmunalized or been conducted through a partisan frame. All of this is facilitated by the fact that the investigative agencies, the police, and the prosecution are often not independent. If the evidence of the aftermath of the Delhi riots of 2020 or the probes after recent lynchings are any indication, we will see an even more systematic institutionalization of majoritarianism in the administrative practises of the state.

In short, the inescapable conclusion is that the Hindu Rashtra will pull no stops in ensuring that it is clear that it is a Hindu Rajya or at least the Rajya of Hindus.
The Authoritarian Moment

At this historical juncture, Hindu nationalism has turned into a full-blown reactionary, authoritarian ideology with deeply fascist elements. India is, at this moment, haunted both by the twin spectre of majoritarianism and authoritarianism. These have a deep elective affinity, but they are not identical. But no account of Hindu nationalism—and the threat it poses to democracy—would be complete without an analysis of its political style. Its destructive potential for Indian democracy is not just in the specifics of the ideology. The one constant element to its articulation is an anti-Muslim prejudice that gives it a propelling power. But beyond that there is a deeper transformation of the political culture that threatens to unleash a combination of control and violence that is unprecedented in Indian democracy. Hindu nationalism has a compulsive desire to control the information order. In some ways it is consistent with its political style to insist that command of the information order is central to its political project. Hindu nationalism managed to control significant sections of the broadcast media in ways that are unprecedented to be conduits of its ideology. A lot of this would not have been possible without the willing cooperation of Indian capital.

In some ways the key to understanding the BJP’s institutional imagination is not to focus on the distinction between Hindu Rashtra and Hindu Rajya but on its vision of what might be called the ‘party state’. If it has an ambition, it may not be to formally abolish the distinction between rajya and rashtra (in practice it will do so). It will rather be to place a Hindu Nationalist party or organization as the institution through which all social mediation happens. The party not only knits together rashtra and rajya, it exercises control over and mediates all of civil society. Numerous examples can illustrate this. The RSS may not be formally against the institutional pluralism of Hinduism. But it certainly seeks to place itself in a position where this institutional pluralism can be, in a coordinated way co-opted into the RSS fold. What we are seeing under Modi is a colossal reorganization of the institutional life of Hinduism in this direction; in some ways, the liturgy at Ayodhya was an example of this. But this extends even further. When, for example, the icons of Indian capital like Ratan Tata have to pay open obeisance to the RSS, it is a sign that state–capital relations will also be mediated and controlled through the Party and its associated organizations. One can go on: the RSS will exercise this mediating power over media, academia, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) even possibly the professions.

The model in some ways are the Communist Parties. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) in West Bengal for example had perfected this model of the party state. The Chinese Communist Party—at a quite different level of authoritarian control, also positions itself as the organization through which all social mediation and control takes place. The BJP may never be able to acquire that kind of control. But all the indications of its governance style are that it would love to embrace a party state model—where the party becomes the final arbiter of right and wrong.

Party states have an element of authoritarianism built into them. But the particular charge of the Hindu nationalism comes from the moral style it is adopting. The central element of this style is what I have elsewhere called, ‘moral cretinism’. The term ‘moral cretinism’ was perhaps first used by Alan Bullock in his biography of Hitler (Bullock, 1952). It referred to a peculiar immunity that fascists had to any moral considerations or motivations. Bullock was not entirely clear whether this was simply a deep incapacity, a pathological trait or a willed condition. But what the term captured quite startlingly was the idea that one could imagine a politics which was increasingly immune to any of the normal moral sensibilities. It referred to a condition where our ordinary sense of compassion and decencies get immobilized. They get immobilized to the point where a total inversion of values becomes possible: the ‘other’ is demonized to the point where their basic humanity disappears from plain sight, the truth is an object of contempt. The ordinary moral terms that should be positively valued—pity, compassion,
sympathy, civility—become terms of contempt, supplanted by new virtues like pitilessness, indifference, antipathy, and incivility.

At various points, even the most morally progressive individuals can act like cretins: incapable or unwilling to be moved in the face of manifest moral demands. Radical inequality, where our fellow citizens almost seem like some other species, whose existence places no moral demands on us, can also produce a quotidian kind of cretinism. Collective identities can sometimes abstract our thoughts away from the humanity and individuality of others, and make us particularly prone to cretinism. We are immune to the moral values at stake beyond the fulfilment of our own collective narcissism. Our morality is defined by the need to seek new enemies. Nationalism can sometimes lead to a profound moral regression in just this sense. What is distinctive about Hindu nationalism under Modi is that cretinism itself becomes a high moral standard. It is hard to imagine a time in recent history where political leaders openly support a culture of violence without compunction or any trace of self-consciousness, public discourse routinely carpet-bombs fine distinctions with a view to making any nuanced moral responses impossible, and sympathy is routinely so partitioned along partisan lines that the possibility of any human response to tragedy and atrocity seems like a distant gleam.

For Hindu nationalism, this moral cretinism is actually part of its aesthetic allure. It induces a certain kind of disinhibition, the key feature of fascist politics. Truth is tied too much to the coercion of reason. If something is true, I have to believe it; I am obliged to believe it. But what if there is a certain kind of freedom you experience in breaking the shackles of truth? Hannah Arendt once perceptively noted that truth is ‘conservative’. It presupposes a presumptive reality to which we have to correspond. Lies, illusions, misrepresentations, alternate reality—we experience an exhilarating display of freedom in these. We like to inhabit our imaginations—make things up; the purpose of language is not just to represent but to ‘create’. We find the imagination more liberating than reason. The attractiveness of leaders who are contemptuous of the truth and of moral constraints is just this. People see in their disregard of truth a perfect freedom: the leader is so free he can even disregard the truth.

Hindu nationalism has at the moment licensed a cult of personality. For in an era impatient with institutions, salvation had to be found in charismatic individuals who could stamp their destiny on the nation. To even suggest that it is foolish to deny Modi’s political appeal is to risk being complicit in what he does with his political power. But one cannot understand the power of Hindu Nationalist politics if one does not bring the sheer distinctiveness of Modi into the picture. He displayed, like all authoritarian characters, the sheer will to power, a ruthlessness that is itself part of the attraction. He came across as effective for the sheer energy and single-mindedness he put into his political pursuits. Confronted with opponents who had, it seems, almost lost the will to pursue power, his will stood out. The second element was his ability to produce affective identification. He managed to portray himself as India’s success story, the everyman who could fight adversity and rise to the top on his own effort.

He had a visceral dislike of the Gandhi dynasty but, in the critique of dynastic politics, he positioned himself against a corrupt and entitled order. The more moral and intellectual contempt that was heaped on him, the easier that identification became. Third, he positioned himself as a moral paragon—in whom self-interest was not even possible. In India, it is very common for kinship relations to override any conception of public and private. But paradoxically, it makes the appeal of someone who stands apart from kinship—and who thereby claims to have no self-interest, only a concern for the general good—all the more resonant. This is not simply the virtue of the allegedly celibate pracharak, it is the virtue of a leader who did not inherit a family mantle and will not leave one. Fourth, this was a speaker for whom identification was created by his locutionary campaign. The truth is made through the act of speaking; it is not an independent test of veracity. The very thing that commentators find a weakness, the refusal to answer questions or seriously face a press conference, was the very thing that shored up his power. To
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acknowledge someone else’s questions is to cede possibility to the idea that someone else might have the truth. The fusion of truth and conviction is the hallmark of Hindu Nationalists politics: the perfect antidote to liberals who cannot take their own side in an argument. And finally, there was at least in 2014 the ability to cleverly craft messages, the ability to tell different audiences that he was speaking to them. He made himself the Representative of the Nation, with all his contradictions enfolded within him. His followers made him the ultimate apotheosis of the Indian nation.

Is the cult of the leader incompatible with the institutionalization of the Party State? It is possible that the two will run into headlong contradiction. But for the ideologically single minded, the two often go together. The leader needs the party for control; the party needs the leader to personify its political goals. An unchallenged leader is a source of fear and discipline the party needs; the party is in some sense the organization through which the leader exercises power. It is not an accident that in party states like Nazi Germany on the Right, or Communist China on the Left, the party and the cult of leadership have coexisted.

Hindu nationalism has, under Modi, latched on to the language of populism. These two languages have an elective affinity. Both posit an already constituted people in whose name the leader or the party speaks. Both operate on the assumption that there is a singular account of the public good, and the leader or the party is the custodian of that good. Any disagreement, is to be therefore understood as a betrayal. Dissent is closer to act of treason. Both have a suspicion of the fragmentation of power: they say it as a ruse to prevent the consolidation of a singular purpose or identity. They are therefore contemptuous of all checks and balances, all formal constraints on power. Almost all the important checks and balances of Indian democracy have been eroded. Independent institutions like the Supreme Court have not held the state accountable in basic matters of civil liberties and habeas corpus; anti-terror laws and sedition laws continue to be used against dissenters; academic freedom is increasingly in peril, and almost all the formal constrains of constitutional and administrative procedure can be put aside at will. Hindu nationalism’s biggest casualty has been the Indian Constitution. The interpretation of the constitution, and its custodianship by important institutions, is now so capricious that no one can tell you with a straight face what the Indian Constitution actually is.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Hindu nationalism has been a constant shadow on Indian democracy, in part a product of the long debate over nationalism and representation. It has become the dominant political sensibility of India politics, which is now irrevocably majoritarian. But that majoritarianism is now allied to a deep-seated authoritarianism, reflected in its institutional imagination, in its moral psychology and political style. Can it be defeated? At one level, this is an easy question. Electorally defeating Hindu nationalism depends on contingent political conjunctures. One can overtheorize this question. But the mathematical truths of Indian politics still afford opportunities to defeating the BJP. Simply put, states where the opposition can provide a single or united alternative to the BJP are states where the BJP will struggle. Its vote share to seat conversion ratio has been facilitated by the fragmentation of the opposition. So in part, the answer to this question depends on opposition electoral strategizing and capabilities. The BJP could weaken because of its own lack of performance. Its economic performance before the pandemic was middling at best, on the most generous interpretation. The modest tides of discontent, and the power of social movements has so far failed to seriously dent the BJP’s electoral power. How long will this opening last? How Modi might respond to a dent in his popularity? What political moves will he come up with? This is anyone’s guess. This article will not gaze into the future and predict what is
politically in store. But here are two dangers to Indian democracy worth noting. The first is that Hindu nationalism’s transformation of Indian civil society is deep and far reaching. The open justification of communal prejudice, the empowering of right-wing vigilante groups, and susceptibility to a moral cretinism are not going to be easy to put back in the bottle. It is hard to estimate this, but it might also be the case that Hindu nationalism has now made enough inroads into the state, planting enough committed elites in key positions that even the hue of the state might not be as easy to change with just an electoral defeat.

The second risk is: What is Hindu nationalism’s commitment to electoral democracy? If electoral democracy ceases to legitimize Hindu nationalism, how will it respond? The structure of the party, and the fact that a kind of violent vigilantism is institutionalized in the party especially in states like UP should alert one to the prospect that a transition of power may not be entirely peaceful. Or even if there is, there may be constant attempts to subvert constitutional democracy by extra-constitutional or even violent means. Will such defeat inflame the victim complex that Hindu nationalism trades on, to the point that all bets are off in terms of the kind of communal polarization possible? Hindu nationalism has tested Indian democracy to a dangerous point while in power; it might test it even more in days to come. But defeating nationalism will require engaging with the long arc and deep fissures of Indian history since the nineteenth century.

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