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### 'Neo-Hindutva'

Evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism

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## INTRODUCTION

### **‘Neo-Hindutva’: Evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism**

Indian politics is in a state of considerable flux and Hindu nationalism has emerged as a more dominant political force than ever before. Recent years have seen an unprecedented surge in the electoral prospects of the leading Hindu nationalist political force, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It came to power with its first overall majority in 2014 following an innovative and resoundingly successful campaign by its controversial leader, Narendra Modi, and party president, Amit Shah. They were helped by Congress ineffectiveness, accusations of corruption, and lacklustre leadership, enabling the BJP to lead the country for the first time since their National Democratic Alliance coalition government a decade earlier.

But 2014 was by no means the apex of the ‘Saffron Wave’ (Hansen 1999). At the state level, the BJP has gone from ruling 7 of 29 states at the point of Modi’s national election victory to, at the time of writing, holding power in 21 states (which contain more than 70 per cent of the country’s population). Hindutva since 2014 appears to be more confident, proud, brazen, and belligerent than ever before. Hindu nationalist political hegemony is such that actions which earlier might have been unimaginable are now a reality: a firebrand preacher appointed Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, a Union Minister garlanding men convicted of lynching a Muslim trader in Jharkhand, state-sanctioned ‘anti-Romeo’ squads hounding interfaith couples. This level of political ‘saffronisation’ seems to suggest, according to Christophe Jaffrelot, that India could be heading ‘toward a Hindu state’ (2017).

Hindutva’s ambitions go considerably beyond the ballot box. The movement is committed to root-and-branch societal transformation – in the form of a so-called ‘Hindu Renaissance’ – and to this end have made inroads into education, development, the environment, industry, culture, and almost every other aspect of public life. The Hindu nationalist movement has always been diverse and multifaceted: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has long presided over an extended and ever-growing *parivar* (family) of organisations that share many of its ideological underpinnings (Jaffrelot 2005). The exact relationship between these diverse institutions remains something of a moot point, but here is not the place to deliberate whether they are close-knit divisions of the RSS or simply, as they often insist, autonomous but ‘inspired’ by the Sangh. What is clear, however, is that despite overlapping principles, goals, methods, and personnel, there are also moments when differences emerge. These groups of the *parivar* have grown and evolved over the past decade, increasingly making their presence felt across Indian society. With government-backing, organisations and individuals who previously were peripheral and considered outlandish, now have a seat at the table: whether deciding educational policy and running universities, or through appointments to cultural institutions, economic bodies, and even the judiciary.

What has also happened is that Hindutva has developed and spread far beyond the organisational network that is conventionally linked, directly or indirectly, to the RSS. To identify this is not to suggest it is an entirely new phenomenon, *per se*: Savarkar’s *Essentials of Hindutva* and the Hindu Mahasabha both predate the RSS, and the ‘ownership’ of

Hindutva ideology is continually contested and reshaped. As William Gould (2004) and others have shown, Hindu nationalism and communalism even pervaded the political language and symbolism of the Indian National Congress from the late colonial period. Even today, politicians from across the spectrum – not least Rahul Gandhi’s Congress – are accused of ‘soft Hindutva’ when choreographing conspicuously Hindu-inflected campaign strategies and photo opportunities. Hindu nationalism, therefore, is not to be understood as a neatly-definable ideology, nor one that has ever been limited to just ‘outwardly’ communal, or even political, institutions and actors. Equally, this special issue does not assume any kind of ‘Hindutva orthodoxy’: whilst in principle the Sangh is fundamentally prescriptive, and the ideology of Hindutva emphasises unity and psychological conformity, it is very clear that the Sangh Parivar more broadly is heterodox. This is partly by design: an effective ‘division of labour’ (Jaffrelot 1996, 123) that is often to its overall advantage. It is also sometimes wracked by internal dispute. Consider, for instance, the breadth of attitude, often diametrically opposed, towards economic liberalisation, or the recent tensions between VHP President, Pravin Togadia, and the BJP.

But Hindutva *is* ever-changing. The Sangh Parivar formulation – the ‘big three’ of the RSS, VHP, and BJP, as well as the dozens of closely connected groups, from the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (trade union) and Kisan Sabha (farmers’ union), to Vidya Bharati (educational network), the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (student union), and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (‘tribal welfare’ organisation) – fails to encompass the full diversity and multipolarity of Hindutva. Hindu nationalism now permeates into new spaces: institutional, territorial, conceptual, ideological. These developments raise questions which require us to reframe prevailing understandings of Hindutva. How have the internet and social media changed Hindu nationalism? What are we to make of Hindutva-sympathetic gurus and ‘godmen’, seemingly ever-more politically involved? Where are we to locate Hindutva in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It has clearly long outgrown its ‘Maharashtrian crucible’ (Jaffrelot 2007, 14), but what are its geographical limits within India: is it truly pan-national, and how is it differently inflected in urban and rural settings? What of the famously BJP-supporting NRIs: why does Hindutva appeal to Indians overseas? Does it reproduce and mimic the homeland ideology, or does Hindutva have distinctive appeal and vernacularisation in the diaspora? To what degree is 2014 a rupture – does it represent a paradigm shift for Hindutva? How substantially has the Modi era changed Hindu nationalism, and India, more broadly? And how can we understand the relationship between Hindu nationalism and the judiciary, between Hindutva, charity and development? This special issue seeks to address these questions, and more.

### **‘Neo-Hindutva’**

The special issue emerges from an article, also in *Contemporary South Asia*, which proposed the term ‘neo-Hindutva’ as a way to identify and understand ‘idiosyncratic expressions of Hindu nationalism which operate outside of the institutional and ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar’ (Anderson 2015, 47). Edward Anderson’s framing of ‘neo-Hindutva’ drew on Reddy’s identification of Hindutva’s ‘diffuse logic’, which is both nebulous and in process, and can become ‘a mediating discourse in its own right’ (2011, 421). A number of people have noticed the particularly striking way in which expatriate Hindu nationalism is

distinctive and hybrid, replete with ‘vernacular forms that negotiate local legal, social, moral, and political environments in ways that variously concentrate or dilute their ideological emphases’ (Reddy 2012). This corpus of work includes, amongst others, scholarship on the US by Vijay Prashad (2001, 2013), Prema Kurien (2007), and Martha Nussbaum (2007), and research on Britain by Dhooleka Raj (2003) and John Zavos (2008). Others have identified how Hindu nationalism has evolved in new ways in India and transnationally, through the media (Rajagopal 2001; Udupa 2015), the internet (Lal 1999, Therwath 2012), pedagogical sites (Sarkar 2002; Sutton 2018), gurus and their followers (McKean 1996; Nanda 2009), the visual landscape (Brosius 2005), across gender and sexuality (Sarkar and Butalia 1995), and yet more diffuse locations and discourses, domestic and global (Zavos et al 2012; Doniger and Nussbaum 2015; Basu 2017).

Another intervention that has analysed the stretched territorial and religious contexts in which we find Hindutva, and which this special issue also expands upon, is the work of Arkotong Longkumer (2017), who examines the activities of the Sangh Parivar in Northeast India. A region traditionally seen as a recalcitrant periphery, unable to integrate with the ‘idea of India’ through numerous ethnic nationalisms (Baruah 2005; Longkumer 2018), the Northeast is increasingly seen as a ‘Hindutva laboratory’ (Spondek 2010). It has become a testing place not only for Hindutva’s ability to re-fashion itself in new spaces, but also to reform their core ideologies, such as Savarkar’s notion of religious belonging through ties to land, in new ways (Longkumer forthcoming). This special issue adds to and builds on the work of these scholars and others who have identified the multifarious nature, and fuzzy edges, of contemporary Hindu nationalism.

Anderson (2015) proposed two ‘categories’ of neo-Hindutva: ‘hard’ – not reticent about being connected with Hindu nationalism, but, for various reasons, often departing from the positioning and praxis of the Sangh; and ‘soft’ – often more concealed and prone to avoid explicit linkages with Hindu majoritarian politics. Under the hard neo-Hindutva label we might put groups like the Hindu Yuva Vahini, the Hindu Janjagruti Samiti, Voice of India, the Forum for Hindu Awakening, Shri Ram Sena, and various other militant and vigilante outfits. These organisations constitute a cluster of individuals and interests that loudly expound Hindu chauvinism and cultural nationalism, but are frequently critical of the RSS and its associated network (often for being insufficiently proactive and hard-line). The soft neo-Hindutva category is inherently more nebulous, and could include the India Foundation think tank, and various international groups such as the Hindu Forum of Britain, the National Council for Hindu Temples (UK), and the Vedic Foundation in America. Soft neo-Hindutva groups are often found in the diaspora, regularly appearing superficially to be mainstream representatives of ‘the Hindu community’ in multiculturalist settings, but avoiding overt associations with the Hindutva network for diplomatic and pragmatic reasons, out of principle and to be, ostensibly, more inclusive.

But neo-Hindutva is not exactly a schema or framework for categorisation, nor is it a typology or taxonomy. The ideology clearly transcends institutions; it has proliferated in the media and educational spaces in ways that are difficult to disaggregate; articulations of Hindutva-inspired Islamophobia are commonplace in domestic and public spheres where previously it was aberrant, much to the consternation of cosmopolitan and secular-minded Indians. Neo-Hindutva can be seen as a start-point for thinking about the dynamic and

idiosyncratic ways in which Hindu nationalism has evolved over recent years, often into increasingly mainstream and normalised (but also obfuscated) forms of rhetoric and mobilisation. These trends can be simultaneously global and local, are increasingly expressed and negotiated in online spaces, and frequently are manifested through the language of blasphemy and offence, the ‘art of being outraged’ (Jaffrelot 2008), and the ‘politics of grievance’ (Sutton 2018). Neo-Hindutva can be hybridised and syncretic; both explicitly political, and a form of anti-politics (even at the same time). This special issue seeks to explore the ways in which Hindu nationalism has developed into new forms and spaces in recent years, and sheds light on a powerful and often misunderstood political identity and praxis that demands our attention. We hope that it manages to build on a crucial corpus of research on communalism in India, while recognising that much of the extant literature does not cover the full dynamism and complexity of Hindutva in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The five articles of this special issue examine the idea of neo-Hindutva from a variety of angles: from the Indian courts, IT professionals and media platforms, to how Hindutva is adapting to the Northeast and tribal regions of Jharkhand. The issue also highlights the ways in which Hindutva ideas travel to other regions of the world, amongst diasporic Indians. In all of these articles, new forms of Hindutva are highlighted that show how their malleable and dispersed nature has moved away from the traditional militancy often associated with their activities. They navigate new spaces, ideas, and practices that reveal their inherent ability to fashion themselves anew without giving up on their core views of what it means to be ‘Hindu’ in an age of globalisation. Whether it is through social media, the courts, economic entrepreneurship, yoga, and commodities promoting the health of the nation, or an assertion of identity in transnational contexts, Hindutva ideas are now beginning to travel and mould its shape according to the host.

In ‘Court’ing Hindu Nationalism: law and the rise of modern Hindutva’, Saumya Saxena shows how the courts become a crucial instrument in adjudicating aspects of what constitute ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’. Saxena examines the ‘Hindutva cases’ since the 1990s, and in particular the intervention by the Supreme Court in 1995 that acknowledged Hindutva as ‘a way of life’. What this did, as Saxena shows us, is to make Hindutva a ‘secular’ principle that was adopted by Hindutva workers as ‘nationalist’, or treated synonymously with ‘Indianisation or Indian culture’ and therefore different from ‘Hinduism’ as religion. In essence, the Supreme Court judgement protected politicians advocating for ‘Hindu’ votes on the assumption that these were not religiously motivated (which would lead to trouble with the courts for inciting violence through religion), but instead were seen as appealing to a constituency of secular voters. The BJP in fact saw this as a move away from sectarian interests, and interpreted Hindutva as an idea that is concerned with ‘justice for all’. Through these successes, the BJP increasingly uses the courts to deliberate on key ‘national’ issues such as a Uniform Civil Code, or in the Hadiya Case, conversion of a Hindu girl to Islam, which the government says are a threat to national security, focusing on fraudulent conversions, and not related to Hinduism. This ‘secular’ Hindutva tries to achieve what is considered ‘Indianisation’, a Hindutva that presents itself as a uniform culture, managing to efface differences, assimilating these differences under a singular way of life.

Arkotong Longkumer’s article – “‘Nagas can’t sit lotus style’: Baba Ramdev, Patanjali, and Neo-Hindutva’ – questions this ‘singular way of life’ promulgated by

Hindutva. He examines how yoga, Baba Ramdev, and the consumer brand, Patanjali, navigate ideas of citizenship through national and economic interest in the form of promoting the health of the nation. Nagaland is a difficult place for Hindutva actors and their nationalist designs, because this is a part of the country that has seen conflict, militarisation, and long-standing demands for sovereignty amongst the indigenous Nagas. Although the activities of Patanjali are a recent entry into the region, it highlights the complex ways in which it negotiates the idea of the 'health of the nation' through state, business, and national interests. Focusing on fieldwork conducted amongst the Patanjali Yog Samiti (local Patanjali organisations), Longkumer considers their ideas of what constitutes yoga, food practices, and the tension between Patanjali as a secular principle, to ideas articulated by Ramdev that explicitly relate to religious and cultural impositions; the paper then moves to *swadeshi* (indigenous goods) to examine the notion of a patriotic consumer. Advanced primarily by RSS workers who see Patanjali as an ideal vehicle to bring about an indigenous economy focused on local production, they also view *swadeshi* as cultivating a sustainable community that is self-reliant and patriotic. This idea of self-reliance and cultivating an ethical self is thus an important feature of how Hindutva ideas manifest themselves through discipline and *seva* (service) in everyday practices over food entrepreneurship and gender empowerment in Jharkhand.

Ketan Alder's article – 'Authority, Ethics and Service (Seva) Amongst Hindu Nationalists in India's Assertive Margins' – shows how *seva* should not be presented as a practice that is self-evidently religious or political, but rather, through engagement with local actors of the Vanavasi Kalyan Kendra (VKK – Tribal Welfare Centre), it is linked to disciplining everyday conduct on the basis of Hindu ethical norms. He specifically examines the making and selling of *mahua* flowers run by the local VKK *sevaks* (service workers), that are cooked and bottled into chutney, instead of fermenting the flower into alcohol, as is a popular practice in parts of rural Jharkhand. By focusing on chutney and not alcohol, the VKK *sevaks* are attempting to create a body politic that is ethical, showing positive character traits through disciplining village attitudes. While drinking alcohol, according to Jhulan, a part-time *sevak*, results in laziness, debt, and lack of engagement in labour – all traits that could be related to social problems – making *mahua* chutney provides the rural people with discipline, organisation, and entrepreneurship that allows them to access the broader universe of Hindu ethical acts inculcated by the VKK. *Seva*, then, presented in the language of ethics, provides the villagers with resources to manage every day conduct into 'states of "ethical" and "disciplined" Hindu acts'.

The cultivation of a Hindu self resonates particularly in transnational contexts where notions of 'self' and the 'other' are powerful identity markers. Priya Swamy's article – 'Neo-Hindutva Affective Economies: Feelings of pride and offense among Surinamese Hindus in the Netherlands' – demonstrates how Surinamese Hindus in the Netherlands negotiate the space of citizenship through notions of Hindutva. Based primarily on ideas of pride and offence – two tropes that recur throughout the article (and elsewhere in the special issue) – Swamy argues that these ideas find resonance in a variety of examples that shape and influence a collective Hindu identity. Unlike much of how 'Hindu' identity is constructed in India, Surinamese Hindus in fact position themselves in direct opposition to Indian forms of being Hindu, instead foregrounding their 'twice-migrant' status. Their relationship with India

remains ambiguous. Therefore, while Hindutva ideas are not necessarily aligned with the political context of Indian Hindutva, the pride in being Hindu that Hindutva creates, and their ideas of collective 'Hindu' feeling, questions and challenges Surinamese Hindu identity. Swamy gives the example of the collective hurt felt around the Holi is Not a Houseparty (HNI) campaign and how such examples raise questions for the Surinamese vis-à-vis their ideas of Dutch 'white' identity. HNI accuses non-Hindus of diluting Holi and by extension 'Hindu' identity, while the Surinamese are then accused of resisting integration into Dutch society. The way discourses around citizenship are thus constructed is crucial to what Swamy calls the 'affective economies' of belonging that Hindutva now accentuates. It is in these heightened encounters that Hindutva provides collective energy.

If one can argue that this collective energy provides an 'effervescence' that binds group dynamics, nowhere is this more visible than on the internet and social media. Here, it is individuals acting out in the vast space of the internet, linking communities on-line and off-line through affective economies of pride and offence. In 'Enterprise Hindutva and Social Media in Urban India', Sahana Udapa examines the way media and Hindutva have become natural bedfellows, primarily through the way the BJP have utilised social media more than any party in the 2014 elections and the subsequent regional-wide elections. Udapa proposes 'enterprise Hindutva' as a trope to discuss how media-savvy individuals are engaged in online political activities on Twitter. She discusses the ways in which individual actors – educated, urban, and middle-class – navigate the online world by running an anonymous, 'trolling' Twitter handle. They are sympathetic to Hindutva ideas, but not as one would imagine them to be. Udapa deftly shows how their online and offline personalities conflict when she meets them in person to discuss their Twitter handle. While they can come across as difficult and harsh in their online personas, in the offline encounters they present themselves as polite, accommodating, and open to discussing issues, even criticism of their Hindutva stance. This new group of Hindutva sympathisers are not necessarily the type associated with cow vigilantes, those chanting 'Bharat Mata', or indeed those with a hatred against Muslims or Christians. Certainly, they are Modi supporters, Hindus who are on the right of the political spectrum, but they represent the cosmopolitan and middle-class landscape of urban India. The internet is a new space where these Hindutva actors can flourish, which asks us to expand and extend the remit of Hindutva from what they themselves call 'fringe' elements (for instance, the militant youth group, the Bajrang Dal) to the mainstreaming of Hindutva that comprises different opinions, approaches, and debates.

These articles complement what Christophe Jaffrelot calls 'the Saffronisation of the public sphere'. In this issue Jaffrelot talks with Edward Anderson about the changing nature, and future, of Hindutva through key themes and events. Jaffrelot speaks about his own entry into the study of Hindu nationalism, charting its rise from the 1980s onwards when the Ayodhya issue was emerging, to the rise and fall of the BJP governments in 1996 and then again from 1998-2004, and 2014. Interestingly, Jaffrelot is in a position to view the activities of Hindu nationalism over the longue durée – despite the prediction of many that it was simply a flash in the pan – and its manifold adaptations in contemporary India. This new confidence, since the 2014 election, has given rise to vigilantism. There is a parallel state structure appearing, argues Jaffrelot, seen in cow protection vigilantes, supported by those in government, which is effecting a Hindu nation. This move, he argues, is the banalisation of

Hindu nationalism that is increasingly permeating every aspect of life. Not only is it creating a parallel state, but also asymmetrical feelings and calls to devotion infringing on individual lives (for example saying ‘Bharat Mata Ki Jai’; or disallowing Muslims from praying outdoors). The ‘saffronisation of the public sphere’, then, has a new edge through the surge of Hindu nationalism. Will India be a form of ethnic democracy based on the sentiments of the majority? What if this majoritarianism becomes further entrenched after the 2019 elections? These questions, reflected on by Jaffrelot, are increasingly urgent.

The evolution and transformation of Hindutva considered throughout this special issue require us to question and revise many of our previous assumptions. In boxing Hindutva into certain categories we are in effect ignoring its dynamism and efficacy, but by recognising its power and ability to be malleable and transformative in the spaces it occupies, we are taking seriously one of the most important facets of modern Indian history, and contemporary society and politics.

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