Towards a Hindu Rashtra: Hindutva, religion, and nationalism in India

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ABSTRACT

This contribution, in answer to the question posed in this collection 'right-wing nationalism, populism, and religion: what are the connections and why?', attempts to account for the development of Hindu nationalism in India as articulated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Hindu nationalism represents a fusion of conservative right-wing nationalism and religion, which has proved highly successful at the ballot box. It aims at the establishment of a Hindu *Rashtra* or state. Central to Hindu nationalism is the idea of *Hindutva,* which interpellates all Indians as belonging to a Hindu civilisation based on a common pan-Indian Hindu national identity. Muslims occupy the position of a 'constitutive outside' enabling the construction of a Hindu *Rashtra*; they remain 'enemies' to be either excluded or assimilated to a Hindu national culture. Consequently, they remain targets of government legislation. This will be illustrated with reference to the recent abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the building of a temple to the Hindu God Ram in Ayodhya, the Citizen Amendment Act, and the government of India's responses to COVID-19. India under Modi, it concludes, is on the way to becoming a Hindu *Rashtra*.

Introduction

The 2019 election may have been the most crucial in India's modern history.[1] The re-election of Narendra Modi as Indian prime minister in a landslide victory[2] raised the spectre of Hindu majoritarian rule in South Asia's largest state (Adeney 2020; Roy 2020). Armed with an outright majority in the Lok Sabha (National Assembly), which has freed him from the constraints of having to accommodate the interests of his coalition partners, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has set about trying to implement a Hindu nationalist agenda centred around the principle of *Hindutva*.[3]

Central to this *Hindutva* project is the assimilation of India's religious minorities into a Hindu *national* culture. As a form of cultural nationalism, *Hindutva* interpellates all Indians as belonging to a Hindu civilisation based on a common pan-Indian Hindu *national* identity. The term 'interpellates' refers to the process by which discourse constructs subjects through a process of 'hailing' (Althusser 1971, 115). The use of interpellation here implies that nationalism constructs subjects as belonging to a 'nation'. Therefore,

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Hindu nationalism constructs Hindu subjects in the same way as Indian nationalism creates Indian subjects.[4] As the BJP stress, *Hindutva* is a 'nationalist, and not a religious or theocratic, concept' (BJP 2014). Whereas the Indian National Congress (INC) sought to integrate religious minorities into a 'secular' national culture – albeit one implicitly based on the values of the Hindu majority – after Partition, in order to differentiate a 'secular' India from a 'communal' Pakistan, the BJP has effectively redefined Indian nationalism as the nationalism of its majority religious community. The 'myths and memories' (Smith 1999) of the Hindu majority now form the basis for reimagining the Indian nation.

This contribution, in answer to the question posed in the collection 'right-wing nationalism, populism, and religion: what are the connections and why?', investigates the development of Hindu nationalism in India and its 'populist' manifestations under Narendra Modi. It will be argued that, although the emergence of Hindu nationalism in South Asia may be seen as a modern phenomenon, a response to neo-liberal globalisation as discussed in the first section, its origins lie in British colonial rule and, in particular, colonial policies of classification and enumeration (Kaviraj 2010) which will be discussed in the second section. The third section will discuss the emergence of Hindu nationalism in colonial India. It will be argued that, in making a distinction between Hinduism as a 'religion' and the Hindus as a 'nation', Hindu nationalists effectively *ethnicised* Hindu religious identity through a discourse of *Hindutva*. Furthermore, the establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915 and subsequently the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Association, henceforth RSS) provided Hindu nationalism with the institutional structure necessary to mobilise the Hindu masses in colonial and postcolonial India. The fourth section will examine the impact of Partition on the development of Indian nationalism. The bitter memory of Partition compromised Nehru's vision of India as a secular, sovereign state and led to the growth of the RSS. The RSS, along with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Universal Hindu Council, henceforth VHP) and BJP, comprise the *Sangh Parivar* ('a family') which effectively constitutes a 'state within a state' in postcolonial India.

We subsequently will examine the emergence of the BJP in postcolonial India. It will be argued that its commitment to *Hindutva* has greatly exacerbated communal tensions and led to the reimagining of India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu state). The violence which occasionally has been carried out in its name, it is argued, is motivated by a desire to *assimilate* India's ethno-religious 'Others' into the Hindu 'Self'. This will be illustrated in the final section by examining the emergence of 'authoritarian populism' in India and the attempts by the Modi administration to realise the main objectives of *Hindutva* since assuming power with reference to the recent abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the building of a temple to the Hindu God Ram on the ruins of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya; and the Citizen Amendment Act, as well as the government of India's responses to COVID-19. It will conclude by stating that Muslims and other minorities in India face a stark choice in a nominally secular India: assimilate to an increasingly 'saffronised'[5] public sphere or risk exclusion and stigmatisation. India, it is argued, is well on the way to becoming a Hindu *Rashtra*, something which could not have been envisaged even 20 years ago (Hansen 1999).

Hindu nationalism as a search for ontological security

On winning the 2014 election, Prime Minister Modi promised to make the twenty-first century 'India's century' (Burke 2014). His election victory was initially welcomed by markets impressed by his pro-business policies that promised to reinvigorate India's economy and reduce endemic corruption.[6] However, rather than moderating the key tenets of his Hindu nationalist agenda, neoliberal ideas, which were first introduced by the Indian National Congress government in the 1990s, have been 'adopted and adapted by its proponents to further the Hindutva project' (Chacko 2019, 377). As Chacko has argued, 'the BJP's turn to markets has not occurred at the expense of its majoritarian ideology, but in conjunction with it' (Chacko 2019, 379).

Hindu nationalism has been seen as a response to the liberalisation of the Indian economy since 1991, a year seen as ushering in a period of neoliberal globalisation. Neoliberal globalisation, that is the opening up of previously regulated areas of the economy to foreign direct investment (FDI) and the corresponding shift to a market rationality, has fundamentally transformed national identity in a globalising world. To be recognised as an attractive investment destination, as Ravinder Kaur has recently pointed out, is to be affirmed as a proper nation in the early twenty-first century world order (Kaur 2020, 15). Markets are increasingly seen by Indian elites as engines of growth and agents of societal transformation. The recent agricultural reform bills which have triggered mass protests in India, are illustrative of a commitment to neoliberal globalisation. They are designed to increase agricultural productivity by expanding market access and providing greater flexibility for farmers. The first bill relaxes restrictions on the purchase and sale of agricultural goods, the second lifts restrictions on keeping stock under the 1955 Essential Commodities Act, and the third introduces legislation to allow contract farming based on written agreements. Collectively, the bills signal an end to protection afforded by *mandis*, government-controlled wholesale markets, for over one hundred million farmers (Shani 2021). However, what is distinctive about the Hindu nationalist approach is that instead of freeing the rational, autonomous, and self-interested individual from social and cultural bonds, Hindu nationalists seek 'to create an entrepreneurial consumer whose behaviour is regulated by the cultural framework of Hindu majoritarianism and is aimed at advancing the Hindu nation' (Chacko 2019, 407).

The creation of entrepreneurial consumers, however, involves a transformation of Indian society and established social hierarchies resulting in increasing dislocation, marketisation, urbanisation, and greater concentrations of wealth and poverty which collectively constitute a state of 'existential anxiety' (Giddens 1991). The mass protests against the agricultural reform bills which culminated in violent clashes at Red Fort, the former imperial site of power in Mughal Delhi, on Republic Day 2021, can be seen as an example of the 'existential anxiety' caused by neoliberal globalisation (Shani 2021). Existential anxiety often gives rise to a search for 'ontological security', which is one framework for understanding the development of Hindu nationalism. Ontological security, for Giddens, resides in the possession of '"answers" to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses' (Giddens 1991, 47). These existential questions 'concern the basic parameters of human life', and presume the following ontological and epistemological elements: existence and being; finitude and human life; the experience of

others; and, the continuity of self-identity (Giddens 1991, 55). Religion and nationalism, as Catarina Kinnvall has pointed out with reference to India, attempt to provide 'answers' to these questions in times of rapid socioeconomic and cultural change (Kinnvall 2004). However, both 'religion' and 'nationalism' are not 'primordial attachments' (Geertz 1963) which bind the Hindu people together, but may be seen as discourses which have their origins in colonial rule (Shani 2017).

The colonial constructions of 'religion' and 'nation'

Colonialism transformed the internal conceptual map of South Asia, introducing collective identities such as 'religion' and 'nation' which could be applied across the subcontinent. Religion and nation are considered universal categories which are characteristic of modernity; yet their origins lie in a particular tradition which was alien to most South Asians.[7] These 'universal' categories were imposed on South Asia through processes associated with 'colonial governmentality' (Chatterjee 1993).[8]

One of the implications of colonial governmentality was what has been termed the 'semiticisation' of local indigenous, faith traditions – that is the reduction of the internal complexity of these traditions to a universal blueprint of religion which was derived from the Abrahamic traditions – and their inclusion under the category of 'Hindu' (Bhatt 2001; Hansen 1999; van der Veer 1999). For van der Veer (1999), it was eighteenth century European Orientalism[9] which conceptualised the diverse practices and beliefs of the people of India into 'an integrated coherent religion called "Hinduism"'. It did this through canonising Sanskrit texts which were subsequently seen to constitute the basis of a distinct Hindu civilisation (*sanskriti*). Consequently, Hinduism may be viewed as a 'product of the encounter of Orientalism, as the colonial imaginary, and Indian beliefs and practices' (van der Veer 1999, 420). Furthermore, European Orientalism viewed the Hindus as an Indo-European 'people' with shared *racial* origins. In the colonial imaginary, the Hindus were 'Aryans' who had colonised and subjugated the 'inferior' Dravidian peoples of South Asia who constituted the 'tribal' and 'untouchable' groups which remained outside of the caste system.[10] Muslims were seen as 'invaders' from Central Asia and as racially distinct from Hindus.

In South Asia, the colonial state facilitated the imagination of the collective identities of 'religion', 'race', and 'caste' through the introduction of modern scientific techniques of classification and enumeration that transformed previously 'fuzzy' communities into 'enumerated' communities (Kaviraj 2010). Collective identities in pre-colonial Indian society were porous and, seen through modern eyes, potentially contradictory. For example, localised *jati*[11] identities cut across caste and religious boundaries. The introduction of the Census solidified caste and religious boundaries and contributed to the objectification of religious, social, and cultural difference (Cohn 1996). Furthermore, the colonial state facilitated the transformation of *local* caste or ethno-religious communities into *national* political communities through a process of enumeration: statistical counting and spatial mapping. As local communities were mapped by the Census, the term 'Hindu' lost much of its historical and regional specificity and became a marker of a distinct, homogenous, and *national* political identity. Religious identities, in short, were hollowed out and politicised.

Hindutva: the development of 'Hindu' nationalism in colonial India

The discourse of Hindu nationalism emerged as a result of the efforts of communities which identify themselves as Hindu to organise themselves into *sabhas* (assemblies). *Hindu sabhas* were established in early nineteenth century Punjab to counter the perceived influence which minority religious groups, particularly Muslims and Sikhs, influenced over the British. Unlike the Indian National Congress, they initially attempted to promote the interests of Hindu communities within a framework of loyalty to the Raj. However, it is important to acknowledge that, as Neeti Nair notes, 'the bounded categories of "communal" and "anti-colonial nationalism" cannot contain the multiple imaginings of the community and nation' among Hindus (Nair 2011, 258). The boundaries between anti-colonial nationalism and communalism were porous; frequently, political leaders identified as 'communalist' – both Hindu and Muslim – were members of the INC. Indeed, as Gould points out, there 'never has been [...] any clear line of demarcation between the institutions ostensibly espousing secularism and those of religio-political mobilisation' (Gould 2013, 23). Religious identities were 'locally contingent, and complicated by local experiences' (Gould 2013, 3).

One of the earliest and most important religious reform movements was the *Arya Samaj* (Society of the Aryans) founded in 1875. As its name suggests, it reproduced the colonial trope of Hinduism as the religion of the Hindus; a people with shared racial origins. It was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883) who sought to reconceptualise Hinduism according to the Vedas, which were accorded the status of holy books such as the Bible or Qu'ran. Dayananda's 'mission was to demystify popular Hinduism completely in favour of a cerebral and formal notion of Vedic religion' which originated in a Golden Age (Sharma 2011, 36). He sought to rationalise Hinduism in order to render it intelligible to the coloniser by purging it of 'superstitious' practices and rituals which were an integral part of the lived experience of the Hindu tradition. Consequently, commentaries on the Vedas (*puranas*), popular myths, legends, and idol-worship were delegitimised and considered corruptions of Vedic ideals. Similarly, he regarded the contemporary caste system as a perversion and degeneration of the four *varnas* (lit. colours but signifying 'orders') outlined in the *R̥gveda: Brahmins* ('priests'), *Kṣatriyas* ('warriors'), *Vaiśyas* ('traders') and *Sudras* ('workers'). His 'extreme vision of a unified, monochromatic and aggressive Hinduism is an inspiration' for Hindu nationalists today (Sharma 2011, 48).

In 1913 the *Hindu Sabhas* undertook to form a national organisation and the following year, the first Akhil Bharatiya (All India) Hindu Mahasabha Conference was organised. The Hindu Mahasabha became the main organisation for the articulation of a Hindu political identity in the colonial period and, in 1915, defined its primary aim as the promotion of 'greater union and solidarity amongst all sections of the Hindu Community' in order 'to unite them more closely as parts of one organic whole' (Bhatt 2001, 60).

Of central importance to the development of a Hindu nationalist discourse is the concept of *Hindutva* which is associated with the work of Vinayak Damodar ('Veer') Savarkar (1883–1966). Savarkar led the Hindu Mahasabha for seven consecutive years from 1937 to 1944, and used the term *Hindutva* to refer to a Hindu e*thnic* as well as religious identity (Savarkar 1998, 115). The Hindus, for Savarkar, were an ethnic community possessing a territory and sharing the same racial and cultural characteristics, three

attributes which stemmed from the mythical (Orientalist) construction of a Vedic Golden Age (Jaffrelot 1996, 27). For Savarkar, the Hindus 'are not only a nation but a *jati* (race), a born brotherhood' (Savarkar [1923] 1989, 89). In his view, *all* Indians, including those professing other religions, are considered part of the Hindu *jati*:

> Every person is a Hindu who regards [. . .] this land from the Indus to the seas, as his fatherland as well as his holyland – i.e., the land of the origin of his religion, the cradle of his faith. (Savarkar 1998, 115).

However, Muslims and Christians were regarded as 'foreigners, since "Hindustan" is not to them a holyland [. . .] [T]heir holyland is far off in Arabia or Palestine' (Savarkar [1923] 1989, 113). Indian Muslims in particular were singled out as they were 'more inclined to identify themselves and their interests with Muslims outside of India than Hindus who live next door, like the Jews in Germany' (Savarkar 1998, 117). Muslims, for Savarkar, were therefore traitors to their 'nation'.

The spectres of partition: secular and religious nationalism in postcolonial India

The Partition of colonial India into the Hindu-majority state of India and the Muslim-majority state of Pakistan precipitated one of the 'greatest human convulsions of human history' (Brass 2003, 75). Over twelve million people were dislocated and up to one million murdered in the Muslim majority provinces of Bengal and Punjab (Brass 2003; Butalia 2000; Talbot and Singh 2009). The spectres of Partition continue to haunt India through periodic communal riots between Hindus and Muslims and strained regional relations with its twin. India and Pakistan are both nuclear powers and have been to war three times since Partition. The Nehruvian idea of India (Khilnani 1998) as a secular, sovereign republic – which was contested in India's independence movement by the INC's use of religious symbols to mobilise the masses – was compromised by the religious violence of Partition. The anti-colonial nationalism of the INC articulated an idea of India which was inclusive of all those who resided in her territory irrespective of religion or ethnicity. It was a modern understanding of India as a secular nation-state. However, it was one based on an *implicitly* Hindu political imaginary. For Nehru, India was 'a geographic and cultural entity, a cultural unity amongst diversity, a bundle of contradictions held together by invisible threads' (Nehru [1945] 2003, 562). The idea of India as a civilisation marked by 'continuity for five or six thousand years' (Nehru [1945] 2003, 50) shared much in common with Orientalist perceptions of Hindu civilisation as a coherent, self-contained universe able to absorb 'alien' invasions and tolerate diversity without compromising its core values or doctrines.[12]

For Nehru religion 'checked the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society' (Nehru 2003, 511). Consequently, he believed it should be excluded from the public sphere. However, the state's commitment to secularism appeared to many of its new citizens as 'the same civilizing mission that the colonial state had once taken upon itself vis-à-vis the ancient faiths of the subcontinent' (Nandy 1998, 323). The attempted exclusion of the majority religion from the public sphere and the suppression of the RSS in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi (1869–1948) by an ex-member of the RSS, Nathuram Vinayak Godse, in turn, created space for

the development of an explicitly Hindu nationalist discourse which challenged the 'secular' Indian nationalism of the INC.

The RSS has since its establishment in 1925 provided the institutional mechanism for Hindu nationalism. It has done so through the establishment of *shakas* (neighbourhood branches),[13] which are staffed by uniformed, male *swayam sevaks* (volunteers). There is a hierarchy within the RSS, with *pracharak* ('full timers') at the apex. *Pracharaks* are highly disciplined cadres who, in their dedication to the cause, forsake family life and remain unmarried, thus resembling a clergy. However, they do not always eschew violence and have been accused of participating in and instigating communal riots. The RSS is one of the largest civil society organisations in the world,[14] and it further consolidated and augmented its position in postcolonial India through the establishment of: first, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in 1964, which seeks to mobilise Hindus throughout the world; and, second, in 1980, of the BJP, the political wing of the RSS.[15] The BJP, which had its origins in the Jana Sangh party that briefly held power as part of the Janata coalition following the lifting of the state of emergency in 1977, has in recent years successfully contested national elections, forming governments in 1996, 1998, and 2014. It has done so through the articulation of an explicitly Hindu nationalist ideology centred on *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* is considered by the BJP to be 'a unifying principle which alone can preserve the unity and integrity' of India (BJP 1996). Out of the patchwork of different but intersecting caste, ethnic, regional, religious, and linguistic identities which make up Indian society, the BJP seeks to create a unified, homogenous, political identity. Given its appeal to India's newly emerging middle classes – disproportionately drawn from upper castes – who have benefitted from neoliberal reforms, it has been described as a middle-class, high-caste project of 'cultural homogenisation' (Appadurai 1996).

Muslims represent the 'constitutive outside' (Agamben 1998) which permits a Hindu nation to be imagined. They are the targets of the policies of cultural homogenisation and frequently of communal attacks instigated by the RSS. Brass has argued that the 'the organizations of militant Hindu nationalism', affiliated to the RSS are 'deeply implicated' in the organisation and production of Hindu–Muslim violence (Brass 2006, 4). This can be clearly seen in the RSS instigated 'communal riots' of 1992 to 1993. Following the destruction by RSS *swayam sevaks* (volunteers) of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, organised pogroms of Muslim communities were carried out by armed mobs of militant Hindu nationalists throughout India leading to an estimated 3,000 deaths (Hansen 1999; Talbot and Singh 2009, 150). In Bombay, Shiv Sena, a regional party based in Maharashtra espousing a particularly virulent form of Hindu nationalism under the leadership of Bal Thackeray, systematically planned mob attacks upon Muslim individuals and businesses in India's financial capital Mumbai (Bannerjee 2001). One of the most recent and notorious was the mass pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. In Godhra, over 2,500 were brutally murdered by Hindu mobs and 200,000 families displaced in a state then led by the future BJP leader and current prime minister, Narendra Modi. Post 9/11 Muslims have become an 'internal Other' to be securitised, and are among the poorest and least represented groups within India.[16]

Towards a Hindu *Rashtra*: populism and *Hindutva* in Modi's India

The marginalisation experienced by many Muslims has turned to fear after the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014. Although from an Other Backward Caste,[17] Modi rose through the ranks of the RSS and is an advocate of an aggressive, militant version of *Hindutva* which resonates strongly with India's newly emerging middle class. Modi has been able to appeal to different sections of Indian society including lower-caste Hindus who have been historically hostile to the BJP given its identification with the interests of upper-caste Hindus. The huge electoral mandate given to him in 2014 and the outright majority achieved in 2019 means that, as prime minister, Modi is in a better position to implement in full key RSS demands: the construction of a Hindu Temple at the disputed site of Ayodhya, a uniform civil code for all religions, and the abolition of special status for Jammu and Kashmir.

Ever since Modi was first elected as prime minister, he has recast the national narrative, from one of a secular, multi-ethnic democracy which has (imperfectly) tried to accommodate the needs of a diverse population, to that of a Hindu nation (Filkins 2019). Certainly, his party's *Hindutva* agenda, reflecting its leader, seems 'more confident, proud and belligerent than ever before' (Anderson and Longkumer 2018, 371). The *Sangh Parivar* is committed to the re-imagination of India as a *Hindu Rashtra* to which religious and ethnic minorities are expected to assimilate, in the manner of Israel (Vanaik 2020).

Authoritarian populism

Populism may be seen as a 'discursive strategy that links together different frustrated social demands and constructs a collective identity of the "people"' which represents an 'empty signifier' that can be placed into opposition to a common 'Other' (Wojczewski 2019, 397). The common 'Other' is usually an 'elite' or a stigmatised minority. It differs from, yet draws upon, the discourse of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) which places emphasis on shared belonging, myths and memories, attachment to territory, a civic culture and/or common ethnicity (Smith 1999). Authoritarian populism refers to the centralisation of power by the state *in the name of the people* against an 'elite' and/or a stigmatised minority. In the case of India, the 'people' are defined exclusively in ethno-religious terms as the Hindu nation and embodied by the 'great leader' Narendra Modi. The 'Other' which permits the 'interpellation' (Althusser 1971) of the Hindu people, and its embodiment in Narendra Modi, is the figure of the Muslim against which India is discursively constituted, constructed, and reproduced as a Hindu *Rashtra*. Muslims, in contrast with other ethno-religious minorities, constitute both an 'external' and 'internal' Other. Pakistan 'serves as the prime external Other against which India is discursively constructed and reproduced as a Hindu space' (Wojczewski 2019, 408). Internally, however, Muslims interrupt the putative homogeneity of this imagined space since they cannot be integrated into a Hindu 'nation' as Muslims: either they assimilate to a Hindu *Rashtra* by adopting Hindu cultural values and social practices, thus ceasing to be 'Muslims with a distinct identity', or 'remain enemies' and thus continue to be considered a 'threat' to national integrity and security.

Like other authoritarian populist leaders, Modi has centralised power by appealing directly to the Hindu 'people' betrayed by corrupt, secular elites who have protected the interests of 'Others'. The people are considered 'morally pure' (Mudde 2004), 'virtuous' (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016 cited in DeHanas and Shterin 2018), and 'sacred' (DeHanas and Shterin 2018) because they regard India as their 'holyland' as well as their homeland. They constitute an *ethnie* (Smith 1999) or *ethnos* (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016 cited in DeHanas and Shterin 2018) rather than *demos*. Modi's authoritarianism thus conforms to DeHanas and Shterin's (2018, 180) definition of populism as a political style 'that sets "sacred" people against two enemies: "elites" and "others"'. The INC stand accused of being corrupt and elitist, led by a half-Italian scion of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty, and drawing support from organised vote banks of Muslims and other minorities who put their own interests before that of the nation. Hinduism, for Modi, functions as the sacred thread which binds the Indian people together as one people. Like Christianity in the West, it serves the dual purpose of 'building nostalgia for a golden national past and rendering Islam as an intrinsically foreign culture' (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 178).

In the Hindu nationalist imaginary, Muslims are depicted as 'invaders' who threaten to colonise India once more through increasing birth rates. Dibyesh Anand (2011) terms the obsession of Hindu nationalists with Muslim fertility rates as a form of 'porno-nationalism'. It feeds on Orientalist tropes of the Muslim male as both 'tyrannical' and 'hypersexualised' which are regularly reproduced in the mainstream vernacular press and on social media by groups affiliated with the *Sangh Parivar*. Muslim men are depicted as preying on vulnerable Hindu women in order to convert them to Islam as part of a 'love jihad'. In order to defend the 'honour' of Hindu women, groups of Hindu vigilantes, called 'romeo squads', patrol neighbourhoods on the lookout for Muslim men.[18] These squads reinforce both communal and gendered boundaries between Muslim men and Hindu women, limiting their interaction with implicit threats of violence.

The 'masculinisation' of Hindu discourse has proceeded under, and is best embodied by, Narendra Modi (Banerjee 2012; Kinnvall 2019). Savarkar had sought to counter the pacifism of Gandhi's interpretation of the Hindu tradition, encapsulated in his commitment to *ahimsa* (non-violence), by highlighting the martial aspects of the Hindu tradition. This militarist ethos forms the basis for the RSS which is highly regimented along military lines. As an RSS *pracharak*, Modi has imbibed this ethos and, as BJP leader, he personifies the 'muscular nationalism' (Bannerjee 2012) of the *Sangh Parivar*. He was centre-stage in the 2014 and, in particular, the 2019 election campaigns where he projected himself as the only leader who could safeguard 'mother India' from Pakistani state-sponsored Muslim terrorism and an aggressive China. His '56-inch chest' (*chappan chati*') is frequently invoked by the mainstream media as a protective shield defending India from attack, and the strikes on Pakistan after the February 2019 attack by Kashmiri terrorists were greeted with a #ModiPunishesPak hashtag suggesting that Modi had single-handedly punished Pakistan for its 'crime' of allowing terrorists to use its territory to attack India. If, in populist discourse, the 'leader does not simply represent "the people" but is actually seen as embodying "the people"' (Moffit 2016, 64), then Modi may be seen as embodying the muscular, masculine, and militarist Hindu nation and the values of *Hindutva* upon which it is based.

From 'soft' to 'hard' Hindutva

Anderson (2018, 373) proposes two 'categories' of what he terms 'neo-Hindutva': 'hard', which is not reticent about being connected with Hindu nationalism; and 'soft', in which explicit linkages with Hindu majoritarian politics are concealed. Although he applies it to a plethora of different groups in India and the diaspora loosely connected to the *Sangh Parivar*, this typology can be applied to the Modi administration which has moved from 'soft' Hindutva to an increasingly 'hard' version in his second term.

Modi's first term was marked by a rise in anti-Muslim violence in states controlled by the BJP which had introduced prohibitions on cow slaughter. An estimated 36 Muslims were killed in vigilante attacks over the killing of cows or eating of beef since Modi came to power (Human Rights Watch 2019). However, the focus was very much on the economy, with the sudden decision made to demonetise the economy in late 2016 by withdrawing 500 and 1,000 rupees notes from circulation in an effort to stem corruption and promote a cashless economy adversely affecting those without access to credit cards and bank accounts (Vanaik 2017, 374–379).

In his second term, the Modi government has taken steps towards the establishment of a Hindu *Rashtra* by abrogating Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which grants autonomy for Kashmir, thus dissolving India's only Muslim-majority state into the Hindu-dominated Union. A Muslim-majority state ruled by a Hindu Maharajah, Kashmir had been incorporated by India at Independence. However, India's claim to Kashmir was contested by Pakistan which invaded Kashmir shortly after Partition. The United Nations was called in to broker a ceasefire and divided Kashmir along a line of control but no final border was established. Further attempts were made by Pakistan to redraw the border by force, most notably in 1965 and then in 1999 when nuclear war was barely avoided after Pakistan military incursions in the Kargil region. However, the line of control has remained unchanged. In return for remaining part of the Indian Union, Article 370 guaranteed Kashmir a measure of autonomy despite a heavy military presence to counter Pakistani incursions and suppress a powerful separatist movement. Significantly, Article 370 also prohibited other Indians from settling there. Its abrogation opens up the possibility of Kashmir becoming an occupied territory like the West Bank or Gaza. The manner in which it was done was certainly reminiscent of an occupation, if not an invasion, with Indian troops pouring into Kashmir on 5 August 2019. The state government was dissolved and prominent Kashmiri politicians detained. Before and after the abrogation, the borders of the state were sealed and all communication with the outside world cut off. Internet continues to be shut down, protesters detained, and journalists intimidated (Amnesty International 2019).

At the same time, the Modi government has sought to exclude Muslims from the increasingly saffronised public sphere by exempting them from the provisions of the Citizens Amendment Act (CAA), effectively stripping Muslim refugees of their right to citizenship on the basis of their religion. The Act makes religion the basis for granting citizenship for the first time in India, thus qualifying its constitutional commitment to secularism. The claims of non-Muslim refugees from Muslim-majority states to citizenship are prioritised over those of Muslim refugees, many of whom fled the civil war in Bangladesh in 1971 and have stayed ever since. The fate of Muslim illegal migrants is

made more precarious by the central government's nationwide citizenship verification system: the National Population register (NPR) and proposed National Register of Citizens. This has led to fear that Muslims who have lived in India for generations could be stripped of their citizenship and disenfranchised (Human Rights Watch 2020). Muslims have been further marginalised by the decision of the Indian supreme court to award the land on which the Babri Masjid mosque had stood to a government trust. Its thousand page decision made no reference to the destruction of the mosque by the RSS in 1992 (Filkins 2019). The award will enable the BJP to deliver on a key RSS goal: the (re)building of a temple to the Lord Ram in Ayodhya which will become the central symbol in the Hindu nationalist imaginary; a *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989) for the new Hindu *Rashtra*.

More recently, the COVID-19 global pandemic has provided the Modi administration, along with other populist governments throughout the world, the opportunity to further restrict civil liberties by imposing a stringent and nationwide lockdown. Although this may have been necessary given the existential threat posed by the virus in a developing society, where the majority of the population do not have access to running water and soap let alone hand sanitiser and face masks,[19] it has been used as a pretext for the further securitisation of society and of religious minorities in particular.[20] Police moved quickly to disband groups of women protesting the CAA who had gathered in Shaheed Bagh in Delhi within days of the lockdown being announced and prominent dissidents and student activists have been arrested and detained, sometimes without access to legal counsel.[21]

The coronavirus has, furthermore, been *communalised* in public discourse. Whereas in many countries COVID-19 unleashed a wave of anti-Chinese sentiment, in India it 'erupted into Islamophobia'. Muslims have been collectively accused of being 'coronavirus terror-ists' and launching a 'corona jihad' (Arnold 2020, 18). India's Health Ministry blamed an Islamic seminary, the Tablighi Jamaat, for spreading the virus by holding a congregation of Islamic preachers in March, which led to riots and hate crimes committed against Muslims. Under the Epidemic Disease Act, criminal charges were filed against the orga-niser of the gathering, Maulana Kandhalvi, for 'deliberately, wilfully, negligently and malignantly' putting the public's health at risk (The New York Times 2020). This contrasts with the government's decision to allow the largest Hindu religious festival, the Kumbh Mela, to take place in 2021 leading to a 'second wave' of COVID-19 infections that has overwhelmed India's fragile health services making it the epicentre of the global pandemic.[22] The irony is that the Act itself is a colonial relic and had been used by the colonial authorities to clamp down on anti-colonial nationalism (Banerjee 2020). The Indian state's use of colonial-era legislation to stymy dissent blurs the boundaries between democracy and authoritarianism (Roy 2020, Shani 2020). For many Muslims and ethno-religious minorities[23] in India, the British Raj has effectively been replaced by the *Hindu Rashtra*.

Conclusion

Writing 20 years ago, Thomas Blom Hansen argued that the Hindu nationalist movement, 'arguably the most authoritarian movement ever in power in the country', had 'come to power at a time when the prospects for actually imposing cultural homogeneity, political unity, and uniform governance on the country as a whole has never been bleaker'

(Hansen 1999, 27). This contribution has argued that this is no longer necessarily the case, notwithstanding recent electoral reverses in West Bengal[24] brought about in part by the government's inept handling of the COVID-19 crisis.[25] The BJP has filled the ideological vacuum at the heart of Indian politics since Nehru's death with a militant Hindu nationalism and hastened the demise of the Congress 'one party dominance system' (Kothari 1964). Irrespective of whether it is able to maintain power indefinitely on its own, it remains a formidable political movement with a coherent ideology, support from India's emerging middle class, and dedicated cadres belonging to the RSS. Furthermore, it has a popular and charismatic leader who is able to woo world leaders and attract the necessary foreign direct investment needed to 'brand' the 'new' Indian nation (Kaur 2020). The BJP has become the 'central point of reference' for the Indian polity (Vanaik 2017, 343) and, drawing on colonial and Orientalist discourses, has interpellated India as a Hindu nation. In Modi's India, Muslims face a stark choice: either to remain marginalised from the political mainstream and to accept their status as second-class citizens; or to assimilate to it by embracing *Hindutva* and cease to be Muslims with a distinct cultural and religious identity in a Hindu *Rashtra*.

Notes

1. This contribution draws on sections of Shani (2014, 2016, 2019). However, the sections have been substantially revised, updated, and rewritten so no permission is needed. See Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay 'Why the 2019 election may be the most crucial in India's history'. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2019-election-crucial-india-history-181120160323155.html. Accessed 1 June 2019.
2. Although they campaigned as part of a National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the BJP won an outright majority of seats – 282 out of 543 – in the lower house, the Lok Sabha, which was the most since 1984. In comparison, the Indian National Congress (INC) won just 44 seats. See http://www.indianelectionsdb.com/. Accessed June 1 2019.
3. See BJP 2018.
4. See Shani (2008, 13) for its application to the construction of a Sikh nationalist discourse.
5. Saffron refers to the colour adopted by the Sangh Parivar. Hansen (1999) coined the term the 'saffron wave' to refer to political mobilisation by the BJP and Jaffrelot (2017, Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018) has applied the term to the public sphere in India, which is increasingly dominated by the discourse of *Hindutva*.
6. Narendra Modi has been compared to the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in his reformist zeal (The Economist 2013) and enjoyed the support of, and donations from, India's business elite and diaspora in the 2014 elections.
7. 'Both "nation" and "religion"', as van der Veer (1999, 419) points out, 'are conceptualised as universal categories in Western modernity and their universality is located precisely in the history of Western expansion'.
8. Governmentality refers to a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) through which 'populations' are governed. It also refers to the development of a complex of knowledges (*savoirs*) which underpin those apparatuses of government (Foucault 2007, 108–109). Colonial governmentality in South Asia differed from governmentality in Europe in that it introduced a 'double discourse' whereby colonial subjects were considered both individuals with property rights and members of collectivities defined in terms of religion and caste (Hansen 1999, 34–35).
9. Orientalism refers to the way in which western discourses on the Orient constitute the Orient and deprive it of agency. See Said (1978) for the seminal account of the development of European Orientalism and Inden (1990) for its application to South Asia.

10. Dirks (2001) argues that 'caste' was an invention of colonial administrators who interpreted Brahmanical texts selectively in order to legitimise and reproduce hierarchy within the Raj.
11. A *jati* is a localised sub-caste group, usually organised around occupation. However, it is used in Hindu nationalist discourse to refer to 'race' (see Savarkar [1923] 1989, 89).
12. See Shani (2005, 104–110) for an analysis of Nehru's *Discovery of India*.
13. Before the 2019 elections, there were an estimated 56,859 *shakas* (Vanaik 2017, 49), although this number may have subsequently increased.
14. The RSS does not keep official membership records but membership has more than doubled in the past ten years and the total membership may range from a minimum of 500,000 to six million. This makes it the largest civil society organisation in the world, effectively 'a state within a state'. See 'RSS membership doubled in 10 years, says its official,' *The Hindu* 15 August 2019. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rss-membership-doubled-in-10-years-says-its-official/article29101108.ece. Accessed 26 June 2020.
15. In addition to the BJP and RSS, the Sangh Parivar also include a myriad of other smaller organisations which are increasingly important actors in Indian politics. These include the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (trade union), the Kisan Sabha (farmers' union), the Vidya Bharati (educational network), the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (student union), and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram ('tribal welfare' organisation). See Anderson and Longkumer (2018, 372) and Vanaik (2017, 46).
16. In 2006 the government-appointed Sachar Commission estimated the Muslim population to be 13.4% of the population. It concluded that Muslims were the most marginalised community within India in terms of literacy and employment and that 'the abysmally low representation of Muslim OBCs suggests that the benefits of entitlements meant for the backward classes are yet to reach them' (Sachar 2006).
17. Other Backward Class is a term used by the government of India to refer to socially disadvantaged castes that form a significant part of the Hindu population.
18. See Bhatia (2017) for more on 'love jihads'.
19. As of February 2021, there are over 11 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 resulting in over 150,000 deaths. https://covid19.who.int/ Accessed 26 February 2021.
20. See *Scroll.in*. 2020. 'Following authoritarian regimes around the world, India is using Covid-19 pandemic to crush dissent', May 15. https://scroll.in/article/961431/delhi-police-is-making-arbitrary-arrests-and-crushing-dissent-under-the-cloak-of-lockdown. Accessed 25 May 2020.
21. Estimates of those arrested in north-eastern Delhi alone number 800, according to *The Indian Express*, 13 April 2020: https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/ne-delhi-riots-800-arrests-made-as-mha-intervenes-6359541/) . Accessed 25 May 2020.
22. The Kumbh Mela is the largest Hindu festival and takes place every 12 years. Despite the global pandemic, it was brought forward one year as it was deemed to be astrologically more auspicious. The Kumbh Mela culminates at Hardiwar, Uttarakhand, where over nine million pilgrims congregated to bathe in the holy waters of the Ganges between 14 January and 27 April 2021. See https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/dehradun-news/91-million-thronged-mahakumbh-despite-covid-19-surge-govt-data-101619729096750.html. Accessed 20 May 2021. This led to an exponential increase in COVID-19 cases nationally that has been blamed for India's 'second wave'. See https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/kumbh-mela-cited-as-reason-behind-covid-surge-says-jain/article34562127.ece. Accessed 20 May 2021. As of May 2021, there have been over 25 million reported cases of COVID-19 resulting in almost 300,000 fatalities according to official statistics. https://covid19.who.int/. Accessed 20 May 2021. However, the real numbers are estimated to be far higher. https://science.thewire.in/health/the-reasons-to-believe-indias-tragedy-is-worse-than-it-looks/. Accessed 20 May 2021.
23. Sikhs have also been 'othered' in the wake of the farmers' protests by government narratives which represent the mass protests as threats to national integrity posed by Sikh separatists (see Shani 2021).

24. In the West Bengal Legislative Assembly held in 2021, the BJP lost to the All-India Trinamool Congress by a significant margin (77 seats to 213 seats). https://results.eci.gov.in/Result2021/partywiseresult-S25.htm?st=S25. Accessed 20 May 2021.

25. An editorial in *The Lancet* was scathing about the Modi administration's handling of the crisis concluding that '[d]espite warnings about the risks of superspreader events, the government allowed religious festivals to go ahead, drawing millions of people from around the country, along with huge political rallies – conspicuous for their lack of COVID-19 mitigation measures' (The Lancet 2021, 1683).

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Disclosure statement

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