

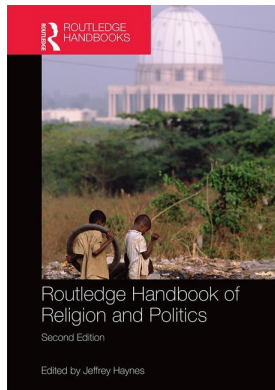
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Peter Friedlander

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5

HINDUISM AND POLITICS

Peter Friedlander

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

The relationship between Hinduism and politics is a complex issue and has gone through several important stages. These could be described as developments during the pre-colonial period, the colonial period and the post-independence period. In the first phase, prior to the late eighteenth century, the term ‘Hinduism’, or a similar Indian-language word, does not seem to have been used by Indians as a term to describe religion and society in India. The term Hinduism seems rather to have been coined by Western observers of India during the late pre-colonial period. However, once the term Hinduism had come into usage in India by the later part of the nineteenth century various groups in India began to use it to describe how they saw the role of religion in India. During the post-independence period there has also been a shifting understanding of the role of Hinduism in politics in India. In the period up to around 1990 what could be described as a secular approach to politics in India put forward by India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was dominant. However, from the 1990s onwards there has been a rise in the power of politics that identifies itself as Hindu. This led to a number of tenures in office for the BJP (*bh rt y jant par*, ‘Indian People’s Party’) and to the rise to power in 2014 of the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

Introduction: the pre-colonial period and the question of Hinduism

There is a long history in India, that is the Indian subcontinent, of the development of the relationship between the state and religious communities. This began with state patronage of the Brahminical Vedic tradition in the expectation that the sponsorship of Vedic rituals was a way to ensure continued prosperity in the material world and the maintenance of the cosmic order. The relationship between the state and organised religion then developed further during the rise of Buddhism in India and was marked by a belief that state patronage of Buddhism ensured not only the continued maintenance of the sacred order but also protected the secular world and the realms of the ruler from attack.

A further important aspect of state patronage of religion was that local state rulers gifted land revenue from villages to monasteries and temples on a permanent basis, and this allowed for localised institutional state patronage of religious institutions. These understandings of the relationship between religion and politics and the need for the state to patronise a range of religious traditions, such as the Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jain communities,

were highly successful in India, and influential elsewhere in Asia, up to the end of the first millennium.

The arrival of Central Asian communities identifying as following Islam led to changes in models of governance in India. From the eighth century onwards Sind, present southern Pakistan, began to be ruled by groups that identified with Arab cultures and Islamic concepts of the relationship between politics and religion. Then around the beginning of the first millennium Sultanates governed by Central Asian communities began to be established in northern India and finally from the sixteenth century onwards the Sultanates were displaced by the Mughal Empire, which drew upon Persian notions of polity in its understanding of the nature of the state and religion.

One of the key differences between earlier Indic periods and the Sultanate and Mughal periods was in relation to state patronage of religion. Regimes identifying as Islamic normally patronised only Islam and to varying degrees opposed the existence and functioning of non-Islamic traditions. However, there were clearly accommodations between the ruling minorities and non-Muslim majority in India. Indian historians often point to the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542–1605) as a famous example of an emperor who fostered religious tolerance and allowed for the patronage of non-Islamic practice within his empire. However, his successor Aurangzeb (1618–1707) is equally pointed to as an emperor who was notorious for his opposition to non-Islamic traditions and imposing the *jizya* tax, a levy on non-Muslims within a Muslim state.

It is also important to consider whether the Sultanates and Mughal Empire brought with them new notions of the state in relation to land revenue taxes and centralised state control of state patronage of religion which shifted the emphasis in the notion of state from an area in which a ruler patronised religions to an area in which a ruler raised land revenue. Richard Burghardt made a significant contribution to study of the development of the nation-state in South Asia. He argued that based on Nepali practice there is a distinction between country as an area defined by religious associations, for which Nepali uses a Sanskrit word for country, *desh*, and country meaning an area from which land revenue is raised, for which Nepali uses an Arabic word for country, *mulk*.¹ The emphasis on land revenues can be seen in accounts of the conquest of Bihar by Sultanate armies in the twelfth century which link the destruction of monasteries to the redistribution of their land revenues to the new local rulers who had been generals in the Sultanate armies. Likewise, one of the founding features of the Mughal Empire was the preparation of a central register of its land revenues made during the brief rule of Sher Shah Suri in 1540–45.

The relationship between religion and politics in India is founded on an Indic model in which state patronage of religion ensured that the state would be protected by that religion, and patronage of multiple religions meant each religion added in their own way to the security of the state.

From the Sultanate period onwards this model was largely displaced by a model where rulers centralised revenue and directed state support to Islam.

The colonial period and the emergence of Hinduism as a term in politics

There has been much debate over the origin of the notion of Hinduism and current research suggests that there are two issues involved here: pre-colonial Indian understandings of community identities; and colonial-period constructions of Western observers of India. The point is that although there are references from the time of Kabir (c.1440–1518) onwards to group identities such as Hindu and Turk, it is not clear whether such references are to Hinduism and Islam as religions, or in relation to ethnic communities. In a study of this topic David Lorenzen

argued that in early references to Hindu from the fourteenth century onwards it is unclear whether it is a demarcation between Indian and non-Indian rulers and communities or between religions.²

Hinduism as a term for a religion began to be used from the late eighteenth century onwards.³ It first appears in missionary writing on India which sought to expand earlier categories of Christian, Muslim, Jewish and 'Heathen' by distinguishing between different non-Abrahamic traditions and, in the case of India, creating a category, Hindu. It is from this time onwards that the term Hindu as a reference for all non-Abrahamic religions in India starts to appear and it is characterised as a religion dominated on Brahminical traditions and practices.

After some initial hesitance to accept such an identification of all religion in India as belonging to one category, Hinduism, rapidly adapted, or adopted, this view and it became a focus for community identities in India. This also coincided with the period when due to colonialism many Indians re-examined their culture and religious beliefs and sought to find ways to articulate them in relation to colonial power and the relationship between the state and religion. Initially this took the form of movements such as that led by Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) whose Brahma Samaj was perhaps more a religious reform than a political movement.

Movements for political reform also adopted the notion of Hindu identity and began to employ it for different purposes within political debate. The foundation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 can be regarded as a formative moment in this development. However, the moderate liberal goals of the INC did not appeal to all. On the one hand there was a radical faction led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) who adopted a slogan in Marathi, 'Freedom is my birthright, and I shall have it', and sought to align a militant sense of Hindu identity with the campaign to agitate for the removal of the British from power. On the other hand there were those who wanted to espouse a more moderate form of Hindu identity, led by figures such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915), and wanted to campaign for reform from within the British colonial system. By 1906 these tensions in the INC had come to a head and Tilak and his supporters were expelled. However, the pressure for further splits within the nationalist movement was inexorable and this led to some Muslim groups founding the Muslim League in 1906 and some Hindu factions founding the Hindu Mahasabha ('great assembly') in 1914.

These developments highlighted ongoing tensions over what the term Hindu referred to in an era of religious and political change, when the way a community self-identified had enormous significance. From the 1880s a Sikh movement, the Singh Sabh, campaigned for Sikh self-identity proclaiming 'We are not Hindus' (*ham hindu nah hai*), and to a great degree were successful in establishing that Sikhism was separate from Hinduism. However, many Hindus still regarded Sikhism as a part of Hinduism. Likewise, the Bengali reformer Swami Vivekananda in his address to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 asserted a Hindu claim that Buddhism was a part of Hinduism, a view which was not shared outside of India by Buddhists in Asia. Even more problematic for India was the issue of whether untouchable communities were Hindu. For many Hindus they were not Hindu as their communities were outside of the caste system. So while the nineteenth century had seen the notion of Hinduism come to the fore in India as a possible uniting symbol of Indian identity, it also revealed the deep fissures and complexities that ran through Indian society.

Hinduism and politics in the twentieth-century independence movement

During 1920–24 under the leadership of M. K. Gandhi the INC and the Muslim League joined in a campaign dubbed the 'Khilafat movement' to protest over the issues of overthrow of the

Ottoman Empire, and the demand for independence through the practice of non-co-operation. This period can be seen as the beginning of politics based on mass mobilisation in India and one in which issues related to Hindu–Muslim co-operation in the independence movement became increasingly strained. This notable example of Hindu–Muslim co-operation also pointed to some growing disparity between the liberal approaches advocated by some Hindus and Muslims and more hard-line communal views emerging from the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha.

Two of the founding leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946) and Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), both advocated within the Hindu Mahasabha for a form of moderate Hindu identity within Indian politics. However, from the mid-1920s the Hindu Mahasabha became increasingly influenced by the ideas of a more radical Hindu identity and revolutionary politics promoted by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966). In 1921, while in prison for his revolutionary activities, he wrote a tract, published in 1923, called *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* In this he espoused the idea of Hindutva or ‘Hinduness’ as a founding characteristic of Indian nationalism within a vision of how Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism all form part of one Hindu identity. Following his release from prison after a pardon, he again became actively involved in politics and was president of the Hindu Mahasabha from 1937 to 1943.

An important offshoot of the Hindu Mahasabha was the *Ra riya Svaya sevak Sangha* (the ‘national volunteer corps’, hereafter RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940). This more militant manifestation of Hindu identity drew strongly on contemporary fascist symbolism in its opposition to British rule. Unlike the Hindu Mahasabha, which has gradually faded from prominence, the RSS has remained a major feature in Indian political life and is one of the most controversial Hindu organisations.

In no small part its notoriety comes from the fact that Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, was a former member of the RSS. Godse held Gandhi responsible for the partition of India, an idea that perhaps had grown in his mind during his time in the RSS. The RSS also remains immensely influential today in India as it is a guiding organisation for the BJP, and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, has been for much of his life an active member of the RSS.

On a second front, the notion of Hindu also encountered difficulties in this period as B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) emerged as a leader of the Indian Untouchables. As in other sections of Indian society, caste communities, or *j ti*, also exist amongst Untouchables and B. R. Ambedkar first came to the fore as the leader of the *Mahar j ti* of Maharashtra. In particular the issue was that M. K. Gandhi wanted to include Untouchables within a system of proportional representation in a kind of advisory legislative assembly proposed by the British. However, Ambedkar wanted separate representation for Untouchables in the same way as Muslims were being offered. The British proposed separate electorates for Untouchables, also called by the British ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SC) in 1932, which was what Ambedkar advocated. Gandhi threatened an indefinite fast unless Ambedkar abandoned the separate-electorate claim and accepted his proposal, which was that in some seats within the general electorate only SCs would be allowed to stand for office. Ambedkar had to relent, and in the Poona Pact of 1932 he accepted what came to be known as ‘reserved seats’ for SCs. The importance of Ambedkar’s influence cannot be underestimated and Jaffrelot and other scholars have argued that Ambedkar’s ideas and influence have been a significant challenge to Hindu nationalist ideology in India.⁴

During the independence struggle in the twentieth century there were thus conflicting pressures developing in the notion of what the relationship of Hinduism and politics would be. On the one hand there was a growing strength in support of Savarkar’s view that all Indians were

Hindu, in the sense of being part of Hindutva, while on the other, Untouchables continued to maintain that their traditions had separate identities.

Nehru and secularism in post-independence India

Hinduism, in the sense of Hindu identity, played an ambiguous role in politics after independence. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was the first Prime Minister of Independent India, from 1947 till his death in 1964. He was a Hindu, but was renowned as an advocate of a form of secular identity that favoured secular socialist policies to develop an India within which people could worship as they wished. Nehru's understanding of secular was reflected in the Hindi word he used for it, which was *dharmnirpek a*. This gives a sense of 'not being aligned with any religion'. He also used the same Hindi term for non-alignment to describe his policy of India being a member the non-aligned movement, *gu nirpek a ndolan*. This was quite different from the term coined by Gandhi in 1932 for secular which was *sarvadharm sambhava*, which means holding similar sentiments towards all religions. It is also notable that the BJP later rejected Nehru's Hindi word for secular and adopted Gandhi's.⁵

To some degree perhaps Nehru's position was reminiscent of that of Asoka, India's legendary emperor, as his state fostered the growth of all religions in India, and in particular the Indic religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

Nathuram Godse's assassination of Gandhi and the subsequent ban on the RSS during 1948–1949 certainly influenced post-independence public opinion against Hindutva ideals. However, over time the RSS and other Hindu groups formed an informal alliance, and in 1951 a political party called the Bhartiya Jan Sangh ('Indian people's assembly') was founded as a political party representing the RSS. After a number of changes in fortune, including being banned in 1975–77 during the emergency and forming part of the coalition Janta Party government from 1977 to 1980, it re-emerged in 1980 as the BJP, the ruling party in India in 2015. Alongside this, during the 1960s people began to talk about a range of Hindu nationalist groups as in one sense or another being part of what became known as the Sangh Parivar ('the family assembly'). The BJP's policies are today influenced by a combination of its own internal dynamics and groups such as the RSS, and those within the Sangha Parivar, which act as lobby groups trying to influence BJP policies.

To some extent the Congress Party, as the INC became known after independence, was able to successfully counter threats to its majority up to the 1980s by representing Muslim and untouchable communities' interests and making them part of its core vote. However, during the government of Indira Gandhi (1917–1984, Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984) religion became much more prominent in Indian politics.

Moderate Hindu ideas based on Gandhian thought had continued to be influential after Gandhi's death. One of the leading figures in this was Vinoba Bhave (1895–1902) who had been a disciple of Gandhi and became a campaigner for social justice. His ideas included the notion of the need for universal uplift (*sarvodaya*) and the vision that voluntary gifting of land to the rural poor by rural landowners would be the means to attain it. The Bhudan ('land gift') movement began in 1951 and over the following decades gradually increased the amount of land given to the rural poor. Unfortunately it became apparent that the movement was hampered by issues such as whether the land promised to be donated was actually transferred, and whether the land donated was actually suitable for farming. However, the movement in itself attracted many talented followers such as Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–1979), a noted Marxist, who had been a member of the INC and took an active part in the independence movement struggle. However, by 1974 he was so disillusioned by the state of the country that he launched a movement in

Patna, capital of Bihar, for what he called a total revolution by following Gandhian principles of non-violent mass agitation. Like Vinoba Bhave his ideas were informed by liberal Hindu visions of the possibilities for universal welfare. In speeches he made in the 1960s, such as his address to the convocation assembly of Delhi University in 1966 on 'Hindu revivalism', he contended that much of what that was being done in the name of Hindu revivalism was not what he hoped to see happening in what he would regard as being a genuine Hindu revival.⁶

By 1975 the call for total revolution led by Jayaprakash Narayan was proving troubling for Indira Gandhi's government in some parts of the north of India. At the same time there were also other pressures, such as inflation, growing inequalities in society and tensions between the centre and the states over calls for more federalism. The final straw was in the end a case held in the Allahabad High Court in 1975 in which the judges ruled that her victory in the 1971 election was null and void and banned her from holding office for six years. Indira Gandhi then declared an emergency and took direct control of government, suspending the normal democratic government in India. Eventually, after two years Indira Gandhi rescinded the emergency order and in a return to the democratic system lost power in a general election to a coalition which included both left-wing factions and the BJP.

The importance of religion in this period was also highlighted by the conflict between Indira Gandhi and Sikh sentiments in support of the Punjab becoming a separate state to be called Khalistan. This led her to attempt to weaken the Akali Dal, the political party of the Sikhs, and this helped to contribute to the growth of a militant movement for a separate Punjab which culminated the occupation of the Golden Temple in Amritsar by the militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his armed supporters. In an effort to end this situation Indira Gandhi then ordered the military to storm the temple in June 1984 which led to the death of Bhindranwale and many of his followers. This led to a cycle of violence when in revenge for this attack two of Indira Gandhi's Sikh security guards assassinated her in October 1984, which itself then led to widespread anti-Sikh rioting in which a very large number of people lost their lives.⁷

This devastating outcome points to the rise of the importance of religion in politics in India during this period. It is also dependent on what perspective is taken as to how to regard these contestations over the role of Hinduism in Indian politics. On the one hand Jayaprakash Narayan's 'Total Revolution' movement could be seen as an attempt to re-assert a form of moderate Hindu identity within Indian politics; while on the other hand Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's movement for a Sikh homeland can be seen in part as a response to Hindu assertions that Sikhs are Hindus, and a reaction to not being allowed to represent themselves as having a separate Sikhs identity within India.

This suggests that in considering Hinduism and politics in India it is a mistake to focus only on the relationship between politics and Hindu identity politics as fostered by the RSS. Rather it is necessary to acknowledge that contestation over who is a Hindu and what that means has been a central undercurrent in Indian political life since independence.

Hinduism in Indian politics and the Bavari Mosque 1992

During 1984–1989 when Indira Gandhi's son, Rajiv (1944–1991), was Prime Minister, religion and the impact of Hindu identity politics became much more significant in India. A number of factors contributed to this including underlying dissatisfaction with dynastic Congress politics. However, two other factors were vitally important: the growth of mass media and growing organisation amongst Hindu political groups.

Arvind Rajagopal argued that central to this was that with the spread of television after 1984 outside of the metro cities a new mass audience for Hindi and other vernacular languages

came into existence.⁸ This created, he argued, a split public with liberal secular views more associated with the older English-language media, and a new, more radical Hindu identity characterising the Hindi and vernacular channels. Within this a major contribution was made by nationally serialised TV versions of the Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Ramanand Sagar's 78-episode serialisation of the Ramayana was broadcast in 1987–1988 and this was followed by a 94-episode version of Mahabharata, directed by Ravi Chopra, broadcast from 1988 to 1990. These programmes were a new focus for community viewing and became ways in which new understandings of what it meant to be a Hindu came into being based on the values in the epics.

Around this time the BJP under the leadership of A. B. Vajpayee (b. 1924) and L. K. Advani (b. 1927) joined a major campaign of public agitation to construct a temple in Ayodhya at the reputed site of the birth of Ram, the hero of the Ramayan and an incarnation of the God Viṣṇu. However, the location was in dispute and had been the site of a mosque since 1572 when the Mughal emperor had a mosque built there called the Babri Masjid. In May 1989 at the Hindu festival of the Kumbh Mela at Allahabad, which was attended by around twenty-nine million people, Hindu groups led by the Vishva Hindu Parishad ('World Hindu Council') encouraged volunteer workers (*karsevaks*) to converge on the Babri Masjid site bringing with them bricks from every one of the 600,000 villages in India. Advani was very prominent in this campaign. To encourage the *karsevaks* he rode in a truck converted to a replica of an ancient chariot and staged a *Ram rath yatra* ('Ram's chariot journey') from Gujarat to Ayodhya in September and October 1990. His followers were prevented by the Uttar Pradesh state government from actually reaching Ayodhya and Advani himself was arrested in Bihar at the orders of the Chief Minister, L. P. Yadav.⁹

This mass agitation had gained enormous energy and this led in 1992 to around 150,000 *karsevaks* storming the mosque and demolishing it with their bare hands. This was followed by communal riots throughout northern India in which at least 2,000 people died. There were even riots as far away as Bangladesh where Muslims attacked Hindus in response to the destruction of the mosque. This incident has become a source of permanent enmity between extremist Muslim and Hindu groups.

BJP governments led by Atal Behari Vajpayee (1996, 1998–2004)

Following the destruction of the Babri Masjid the renewed focus on conflict between religious communities, called 'communalism' in India, led to increased support for the BJP. In the general election of 1996 the BJP was the single largest party and A. B. Vajpayee was invited to become the Prime Minister. However after thirteen days he resigned when it became apparent that the BJP could not ensure alliances to gain a majority in parliament. Following the next general election in February 1998 the BJP was not only the largest party again but was also able to form a majority alliance called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which governed for thirteen months. In May 1998 the BJP government then took the credit for authorising renewed nuclear bomb tests in Rajasthan. The first Indian nuclear tests at Pokhran in Rajasthan had been carried out in 1974, authorised by Indira Gandhi with the code name of 'The Buddha has smiled'. Vajpayee commented on this in a speech at the Buddhist site of Bodhgaya in 1988 when he said that now that India had nuclear weapons it had the power to take the Buddha's message of peace to the world. Around this time BJP efforts to build friendly relations with Pakistan were also frustrated by the discovery that the Pakistan military was infiltrating the Siachen glacier area near Kargil in Kashmir. This led to a full-scale military conflict between the Indian and Pakistani armies in the area in May–July 1998.

The BJP had lost a confidence motion in April 1999 and acted in a caretaker role till September 1999 when another general election was held. This time the BJP was able to gain 182 seats and with its NDA alliance held 270 seats, giving it a working majority in the 545-seat parliament with the support of 29 members of the regional Telegu Dasam Party.

Factors which led to the BJP victory in this election included perceptions of its abilities to manage the economy better than Congress. There was also considerable controversy created by the BJP over the issue of 'Indianness' (*Bharatiyatva*) and whether the Italian-born Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi could really understand India in the same way as the Indian-born leaders of the BJP. The combination of economic factors and communal and military security concerns led to the BJP emerging as the only party capable of forming a government.

During the period 1999–2004 under the BJP government a number of issues began to appear that suggested that the party had problems. In power it was no longer in its interest to stoke the fires of communal unrest and it attempted to go slow on the issue of whether to build a Ram Temple on the site of the Bavari mosque in Ayodhya. This impressed neither its followers nor those who opposed it. The external threat issues also refused to quieten down and instead of Pakistan being the main cause for anxiety it was the growing tension along the China–India border that provoked the most concern. Perhaps most critically the pace of economic development turned out to be very uneven and heavily favoured urban middle classes at the cost of the rural poor, who saw little improvement in their situation. Moreover, the BJP tried to promote an image that India was undergoing an economic resurgence. This led to the party campaigning in the 2004 election on the slogan 'India Shining', with images of happy prosperous urban Indians who had benefitted from the BJP government. There was widespread commentary in the press that this campaign failed to connect with the reality of the poor in rural India.

Narendra Modi (b. 1950)

While out of power during 2004–14 the BJP again renewed its approaches to garnering power through mass campaigns based on communalism and reassessed its economic strategies. Critical in this was a generational change in which first A. B. Vajpayee and then L. K. Advani stepped down from their leadership roles, which focused attention on Narendra Modi as a potential leader of the BJP. Narendra Modi was born into a Gujarati Vaishya, trading, community called Ghanchi, of which Modi is a branch, related traditionally to oil pressing and running businesses such as grocery shops. During his childhood he helped to run a family tea shop in Ahmadabad and conquering adversity, gained an education including an MA in political science. Modi was a child member of the RSS from the age of eight. In 1965 during the Indo-Pakistan war and in the Gujarat floods of 1967 Modi worked as a volunteer. After the Indo-Pakistan war, he became a full RSS worker (called a *pracharak* or 'campaigner') and then in 1978 an RSS *sambhaag pracharak* (regional campaigner/organiser). During the emergency in 1975–1977, while the RSS was banned, his activities as leader of the RSS Akhil Bartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Student Council) led him to be in conflict with the government. However, following this he was appointed to various offices of the RSS in Delhi before being appointed organising secretary of the BJP in Gujarat in 1988. He was then influential in organising national events such as Advani's 1990 Rath Yatra campaign and in 2001 he was elected the Chief Minister of Gujarat. In 2002 there was an incident at Godhra in Gujarat where a carriage of Hindu *karsevaks* returning from Ayodhya died in a fire on their train. This led to widespread rioting throughout Gujarat in which over a period of several days more than a thousand people died or went missing and at least 790 Muslims were killed. There has been considerable debate over how Narendra Modi as Chief Minister of Gurajat was either unable to

control the rioting or, as his opponents argue, in some sense allowed the rioting to take place. The seriousness of this was that right up to his election to government in May 2014 some foreign governments, including the US government, had bans in place on his visiting due to the issues surrounding the violence in Gujarat in 2002.

A second communal issue that came to the fore in the years after 2000 was that of conversion and the passing of an anti-conversion law in Gujarat in 2003. The Indian Constitution grants individuals the freedom to practise and promote their own religion as long as it does not threaten to disrupt peace. However, there had been disquiet in some quarters about missionaries and others seeking to convert people from one religion to another. The first state to pass an anti-conversion law aimed at preventing Christian missionaries from converting tribal people to Christianity had been Orissa in 1967. The depth of conflict in that state was also shown by the incident in 1999 when a Christian missionary and his two sons were burned to death by activists opposed to the conversion of tribal peoples to Christianity. Alongside this animosity towards Christian conversion amongst tribal peoples there are also RSS-inspired activities to 're-convert' tribal people back to Hinduism. The complication here is that for the RSS, tribal people have always been Hindus despite many tribal people not regarding themselves as ever having been Hindus and saying that their religious beliefs are not part of Hinduism but separate indigenous traditions.

The contradiction here is that some state governments regard RSS-inspired campaigns as legitimate actions to re-convert tribal peoples but Christian missionary activities as illegitimate conversion activities. The problems that arose in Gujarat at this time also related to conflicts between RSS-inspired groups and Christian groups over attempts to convert tribal peoples. The response of the Gujarat state government to then ban religious conversion appeared to be partisan as it only applied to Christian missionary activities and did not apply to RSS-inspired activities as it regarded tribal people as being intrinsically Hindu, even if they regarded themselves as Christians and held that they had never been Hindu to begin with. This is another aspect of the interplay between Hinduism and politics in India: the question of whether tribal people are intrinsically Hindu, and whether freedom of religious belief includes the freedom for tribal peoples to convert to a religion than Hinduism.

For many people the period 2001–2014 when Narendra Modi held the office of Chief Minister of Gujarat was marked not so much by sectarian issues but by his efforts to promote the economic growth of Gujarat. This, which has often been called the Gujarat model, was based on a paradigm of 'less government, more governance' and emphasised that business should be freed from government red tape and be allowed the freedom to develop as it saw fit. This model is to some degree similar to many neo-conservative models for development which see the central problem as being the need to roll back big government and allow the private sector the freedom to develop a market economy.

There has been considerable discussion of the degree to which the Gujarat model was successful. Like the central BJP government during 1999–2004 it was a model that seemed to promote urban middle- and upper-class prosperity rather than seeking to promote the welfare of all, including rural areas. The figures are open to dispute but it is possible to present Gujarat's development during this period as very successful economically but at the same time as failing to improve the lot of the poor throughout the state and in particular in rural areas.

The BJP government under Narendra Modi (2014–)

Narendra Modi's government came to power in a historic landslide victory in May 2014 with an absolute majority for the BJP in parliament, winning 282 seats in the 545-seat parliament.

So far the signs are that the relationship between Hinduism and politics in India during his government may follow a similar trajectory to those during previous BJP periods in office.

On the one hand the degree to which the government remains secular, as the constitution defines the government of India, is being carefully scrutinised, and on the other the supporters of the government seem keen to test the limits on how they can act.

Indicative of Narendra Modi's own negotiation of his interpretation of secular has been his measured approach to the idea of starting work on building the Ram Temple at Ayodhya. While this was not even mentioned in the BJP's 2014 election manifesto it has clearly been on the agenda of the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, the 'World Hindu Council', an international organisation which is sometimes regarded as associated with the BJP) and remains central to the vision of many RSS activists. However, complications remain and due to a 2010 supreme court decision the site is now to be divided, with two-thirds of the site given to the Hindus but reserving the central third for Muslims. Under such circumstances it is very hard to see how any settlement could be reached and there is talk of Narendra Modi drawing up a five-year plan in relation to the issue.

On the other hand it has been striking that during Narendra Modi's visits to a number of countries he has given copies of the Hindu sacred text the *Bhagavadgita* as gifts to foreign heads of state. In regard to giving a book of writings by Swami Vivekananda and a copy of the Hindu *Bhagavadgita* to Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, Narendra Modi himself commented that he was aware it would cause a storm with secularists in India but he did not care as it was a personal gift from him to Shinzo Abe and he had also given one to the Emperor of India.¹⁰ He does not, though, give a gift of the *Bhagavadgita* to all world leaders and apparently Australia's Prime Minister was given instead a replica of a cricket trophy¹¹ and an original petition by an Australian lawyer in relation to a hero of the first independence war of 1857, the Queen of Jhansi, in regard to her complaints against the East India Company.¹²

When President Xi Jinping of China visited India, Modi gave him a Chinese translation of the *Bhagavadgita*. Xi Jinping's trip began with a visit Narendra Modi had organised for him, a pilgrimage to Gandhi's ashram at Sabarmati on September 17, 2014. On this visit both Modi and President Xi Jinping honoured a statue of Gandhi.¹³ Then on his visit to the USA he gave a copy of the *Bhagavadgita* according to Gandhi to President Obama and spoke of how India is guided by the spirit of non-violence promoted by the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi.¹⁴

Gandhi is normally seen as associated with the Congress Party, as he is one of its founding fathers and was bitterly opposed by the RSS. It is therefore interesting to see how Narendra Modi will take this apparent adoption of Gandhian symbols and ideology and relate them to his support for the RSS. This is also apparent in Narendra Modi's 'clean India campaign' (*svachha bh rat abhiy n*) which he launched on Gandhi Jayanti, a festival celebrated on Gandhi's birthday, on October 2, 2014. This directly draws on Gandhi's use of the symbolism of higher-caste people picking up a broom and cleaning up India by sweeping it clean. This suggests that one approach to Hindu identity politics that Narendra Modi may be trying to make is to draw Gandhian symbolism more into the arc of activities associated with the RSS and separate it from its association with more liberal interpretations of Hinduism.

More problematic for Modi may be whether he can keep a rein on his supporters and how he will deal with some of the programmes advocated by the VHP. In addition to the Ram Temple at Ayodhya, there is also the issue of mass conversions which had raised its head by December 2014. A number of activists had begun campaigns to hold mass conversion ceremonies in which Muslims and Christians were re-converted to Hinduism as part of what was called *ghar vaps* ('Homecoming') ceremonies. However, after several of these events had been held over a period of some weeks, on December 22, 2014 a VHP spokesman said that the events had been

suspended as Narendra Modi has expressed his displeasure with such events.¹⁵ Despite this, attacks on Christian churches and sites in India have continued and activists have continued to hold *ghar vaps* conversion events. President Barack Obama on his visit to India on January 27, 2015 also commented on religious violence and then again in a speech at a national prayer breakfast in Washington on February 5, 2015 he said that Gandhi would have been shocked by the targeting of people for their beliefs in India, which had led to ‘acts of intolerance’.¹⁶ It is possible that the continued violence itself and President Obama’s words may have in some way influenced Narendra Modi who said in a speech on February 17, 2015 at a Christian ceremony in Delhi that his government would not tolerate the persecution of minorities and his government would act strongly against any religious violence.¹⁷

The Diaspora and the future

Another factor in the relation between politics and religion in India is the growing influence on internal Indian politics of Indians living in the Diaspora. There are around twenty-five million people of Indian origin who live outside India. These include Indians who are descended from indentured labourers who settled in the nineteenth century in areas such as East Africa, South Africa, the West Indies, South America and Pacific islands like Fiji. The influence of these Indians on India is to some extent limited today by their connections being mostly with the poorer rural areas they originally came from and the length of time they have spent developing distinct senses of being overseas Indians. However, more recent immigrants who have settled since World War II in the United Kingdom, North America and Australia and New Zealand have come increasingly from urban educated professional communities. This has led to the increased interaction between such migrant communities around the world and India. One impact of this has been that some of the people living in the Diaspora have been attracted to the visions of Hinduism favoured by the BJP and have consequently supported the BJP from outside of India. One factor which has influenced this development is the role that temples and religious identities can play in helping people make sense of their lives as immigrants.

It also seems to be that as some Hindus inside, and outside, of India have become more affluent this has led to an increase in devotional activity which includes temple building, sponsoring religious events such as teachings by different gurus, and fostering a sense of communal identity.¹⁸ So rather than modernity leading to a decline in the influence of religion on daily life quite the opposite is happening and religion is becoming more and more influential.

The importance of this can also be seen in the ways that Narendra Modi, on his various visits to countries outside of India since his election, has focused on the ways that Indians living outside of India can contribute to India’s development. These appeals are in part about economics, seeking new sources for investment in India, but in part they also show the ways in which Diaspora voices are now listened to in Indian politics and are seen as being part of Indian polity. Furthermore, there is overlap between rhetoric surrounding the Diaspora community and the Hindu community. Indeed there was some public controversy in Australia in regard to the organisation of a mass community event where Prime Minister Modi addressed 27,000 people at a public stadium in Sydney. The organisation of this event was handled by a new community group set up for that purpose, led by a prominent member of the Hindu Council of Australia.¹⁹ The sense of an overlap between Hindu conceptions and conceptions of India more broadly could also be seen at an event in Gujarat in 2015 aimed at Diaspora Indians, the *Pravasi Bhartiya Divas* (‘Overseas Indians’ Day’) where Narendra Modi spoke of Indian development and the importance of the River Ganges in India.²⁰ Of course on a purely material level the Ganges is the main support for the millions of people who live in the

Ganges basin. However, the Ganges is also a potent Hindu symbol and is revered by millions of Hindus as a sacred river. In some senses, though, what is evident in how Narendra Modi is handling this convergence of Indian and Hindu symbolism is that he is skilfully balancing rhetoric that appeals to Hindus in particular and to the broader Indian community including Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. However, many are watching closely to see if the rhetoric is matched by actions which foster the welfare of all in India, whether or not they are Hindu.

Conclusion

It is remarkable how much Indian politics has changed since 1990 and the degree to which Hinduism has come to the fore as a force in Indian politics. One of the main questions that might currently be asked is what path Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government will take in its definition of the relationship between religion and politics. It is quite clear that there is no chance of adopting a course like that of Nehruvian secularism, which BJP rhetoric completely rejects. The question is rather, will Narendra Modi emulate a form of the model first established by Asoka, of state patronage for all religions, or shift towards a model of favouring only one religion, as introduced during the Sultanate and Mughal periods, but in this case for Hinduism alone?

It is too early in Narendra Modi's tenure in office to say what course his government will take during its full term of office. The signs so far from the first year of his incumbency are that he appears to be adopting and adapting symbols previously not associated with the RSS and the BJP, such as Gandhi and some form of Gandhian ideas, and incorporating them into a new articulation of the idea of how Hindu and Indian identity overlap. However, the issue now facing India is how to balance the social stability need for the BJP's economic reform agenda against the possibility that the more extremist ideas of some of Narendra Modi's followers could over the coming years destabilise communal harmony in India.

Notes

- 1 Burghart, 'The Concept of Nation-State', 101–125.
- 2 Lorenzen, 'Who Invented Hinduism?', 30–659.
- 3 Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*; Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*.
- 4 Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste and Politics*.
- 5 Friedlander, 'The Challenge of Multiculturalism', 79–104.
- 6 Bhave, *Hindu Revivalism*.
- 7 Jeffrey, *What's happening to India?*
- 8 Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*.
- 9 Sahgal, 'L.K. Advani's rath yatra'.
- 10 *Times of India*, September 14, 2014.
- 11 NDTV, November 18, 2014.
- 12 *The Hindu*, November 18, 2014.
- 13 *Business Standard*, September 18, 2014.
- 14 *Indian Express*, 29 September, 2014.
- 15 *Times of India*, December 22, 2014.
- 16 *Indian Express*, February 6, 2015.
- 17 *Financial Express*, February 17, 2015.
- 18 Nanda, *The God Market*.
- 19 NDTV, November 12, 2014.
- 20 *Indian Express*, January 12, 2015.

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