

**Investigating Hindu Nationalism: Emic Primordialism, Modernity,
Organisational Ethno-Symbolism**

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Introduction

Contrary to Fukuyama's assessment of the post-Cold War world as the 'end of history' marking the definitive political victory of capitalism and liberal democracy (Heywood 1992, 50), nationalist ideologies continue to contribute powerfully to a continuously unfolding, decidedly more complex and less determinate history. A particularly striking and — measured on its own terms — successful example of nationalist ideology is encountered in the shape of a discursive and political formation known as *Hindutva* (Hinduness) or Hindu nationalism. Most widely associated with the BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*) at the head of the current coalition government (National Democratic Alliance) of India, the political success and prominence of *Hindutva* in the world's largest democracy poses a series of highly relevant and challenging questions. In this article, I shall analyse the discourse of Hindu nationalism as articulated in a variety of media and by a network of affiliated organisations over the last 75 years. I shall draw attention to the organisational dynamics of a family of Hindu nationalist organisations (*sangh parivar*) pervading Indian civil society as well as large sections of the Hindu diaspora. Both the discursive logic of the ideology of Hindu nationalism and its wider historical context will be discussed. In theoretical terms, I shall critically apply and test existing theories of nationalism frequently portrayed as conceptual alternatives or 'competitors', arguing instead for their mutually complementary analytical use.

Methodological and Empirical 'Backgrounds'

The argument presented here will draw on data concerning Hindu nationalism as a transnationally circulating ideology. The majority of my own research was carried out in the diaspora setting of the East Midlands (i.e. the Hindu communities of Nottingham and Leicester), where Hindu nationalist organisations have taken root over the past twenty-five years. This was complemented by a series of interviews conducted in northwestern India (Delhi, Rajasthan, UP), the heartland of Hindu nationalism, during February and March 2001. Further crucial data was obtained through a detailed media content analysis of the most widely quoted Hindu nationalist weekly newspaper (*Organiser*) between August 2000 and January 2001. Importantly, I have also analysed the writings of the founding fathers and key-ideologues of *Hindutva*.

As already mentioned, Hindu nationalism is most widely associated with the BJP (or *Bharatiya Janata Party*). As the political offshoot of the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* or National Volunteer Corps), a cultural revivalist organisation founded in 1925 and concerned with national reawakening through bodily and ideological discipline, the BJP also entertains ‘symbiotic organisational connections’ (Andersen and Damle 1987) to the VHP (or World Hindu Council). The latter is best known for a series of mass-scale ritual campaigns during the 1980s and 90s centred on the northern Indian pilgrimage town of Ayodhya, mythological birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram (see Jaffrelot 1996, Hansen 1999, Rajagopal 2001). *Hindutva*’s most infamous manifestation occurred in December 1992, when a mob of Hindu nationalists stormed and demolished a disputed mosque (*Babri Masjid*) in Ayodhya. According to the Hindu nationalist construction of history, Babar — founder of the Mughal dynasty — had destroyed a temple dedicated to Ram in 1528 and had erected the mosque on its ruins. The ‘liberation’ of Ram’s alleged birthplace and the reconstruction of the original temple were the declared aims of the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement, in which the *sangh parivar* — or ‘family’ of some 80 organisations affiliated to the RSS (McDonald 1999) — played a crucial ideological and organisational role. The death toll of the ensuing wave of communal (Hindu-Muslim) violence has been estimated as high as 3000. In February 2002 an arson attack on a train of VHP sympathisers returning from Ayodhya and the retaliatory anti-Muslim pogroms in the state of Gujarat resulted in the loss of several hundred more human lives, thus testifying to the passions the controversy continues to evoke in some people.

The transnational significance of Hindu nationalism has been demonstrated by the organisational diffusion of the RSS and the VHP to East Africa, South East Asia, Trinidad and Mauritius as well as North America and Western Europe. In Britain, the HSS (*Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh*) was established as an RSS offshoot in 1966, followed by the VHP (UK) in 1972 and other affiliated student, women and charity organisations. Significantly, the HSS emulates the RSS organisational methodology of local branches (*shakhas*) meeting regularly for the purposes of exercise, ideological ‘education’ and a series of rituals centred on the *sangh*’s saffron flag (*Bhagwa Dhwaj*). There are approximately 60 HSS branches in the UK today (Bhatt 2000, 559), with full-time workers being frequently ‘supplied’ by the RSS in India and UK-resident enthusiasts being encouraged to attend training camps both in India and in Britain. The ideological presence of Hindu nationalism in the UK — beyond an innermost circle of volunteers (*swayamsevaks*) regularly attending their local units — was most clearly reflected in a two-day ritual gathering (*Virat Hindu Sammelan*) in Milton Keynes north of London in August 1989. Organised by the VHP (UK), the HSS and 350 other organisations sympathetic to their message, this ‘gathering’ was attended by an officially estimated 50000 people. The message was predominantly one of Hindu unity, an attempt to transcend differences of caste, class, region, devotional and linguistic background through the construction of a global and unifying ‘Hindu platform’. Echoing another one of the VHP’s central concerns, the idea that *Hindu dharma* could ‘ennoble the world’ and that diaspora Hindus occupied a strategically important niche in this context (see *Virat Hindu Sammelan* 1989) was also articulated during the event. However, alongside such messages of seeming harmony, inclusivism and tolerance, the *Sammelan* was part of one of the *sangh*’s more antagonistic and transnationally unfolding ritual campaigns. Known as the ‘Bricks for

Lord Ram' campaign, money and stones were collected locally and subsequently sent to Ayodhya in aid of the anticipated 'reconstruction' of Ram's temple.

These introductory empirical observations underline the transnational 'presence' and significance of Hindu nationalism, spanning contexts as varied as India, East Africa and the British East Midlands. Not unexpectedly, the articulation of Hindu nationalism by the *sangh parivar* is thus to a considerable extent context- and audience dependent (also see Jaffrelot 1996, Manor 1998, Jenkins 1998, Hansen 1999, Rajagopal 2001). In the case of the BJP in India, its aims have historically been largely in line with Eriksen's definition of nationalism as 'an ethnic ideology concerned with state power' (1993). In the diaspora setting on the other hand, the RSS may be said to operate within ethnic associations or communities (Handelman 1977). Yet, as demonstrated by the above-mentioned ritual gathering in Milton Keynes and the 'Bricks for Lord Ram' campaign, these contexts are increasingly inter-dependent and intertwined in times of post-modernity. Economic and political globalisation as well as counter-hegemonic ideological reactions against such processes, 'time-space compressions' (Harvey 1990), diaspora communities and their continuously debated relations to the so-called homeland and host-societies respectively — such phenomena all form part of the wider contexts, within which discussions of Hindu nationalism need to be located.

Theorising Nationalism

Eriksen's earlier-quoted definition of nationalism as 'an ethnic ideology concerned with state power' echoes Ernest Gellner's well-known description of the nationalist desire to make political and cultural units congruent (1994). However, a closer look at the literature reveals that even such 'baseline' definitions of nationalism are contested. A frequently reiterated typology of nationalisms thus distinguishes between so-called 'French', territorial or 'civic' understandings of the nation on one hand, and 'German' or 'ethnic' conceptualisations on the other. These two ideal types differ in the postulated criteria or nature of inclusion/exclusion underlying their respective discourses of the nation. According to the French model, national membership is a matter of residence in a given territory and loyalty to its state institutions. Outsiders can — and are frequently expected to — become insiders in a process of assimilation. The 'German' model, on the other hand, defines nationality in ethnic or romantic-organicist terms (Gellner 1998). As such, it conceives of the person as characterised by an inherent and unchanging essence, which in turn determines membership in an organic national whole (Mc Crone 1998). In this second discursive formation, national belonging tends to be ascribed and ethnic boundaries (largely) impermeable.

Aside from this well-known typology of nationalist ideologies, the literature reveals a remarkable extent of theoretical disagreement on the historical roots of nationalism, its sociological prerequisites as well as corollaries. One possible way of classifying such competing theories utilises a tripartite division between primordialist, modernist and ethno-symbolist approaches (also see Özkirimli 2000). Primordialists by and large reproduce the ideological claims made by many nationalists concerning the alleged or assumed antiquity and hence 'naturalness' of their nation. Modernists propose sharply divergent interpretations by stressing the modern origins of the

nation. A wide variety of different analyses are often subsumed under the heading 'modernist'. As such, they stress the importance of phenomena as varied as the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Rangers 1983), the role of mass education in producing cultural homogeneity in industrial societies (Gellner 1994), the instrumental needs of political elites (Brass 1991), or 'print capitalism' (Anderson 1983) for the genesis of the nation and of nationalism as its legitimating ideology. However, they all share the assumption that modernity was a pre-requisite for the relatively recent ideological 'invention' of the nation. Ethno-symbolists argue that the significance of modernity notwithstanding, nationalism appeals to, selects, and (re-) appropriates historically pre-existing cultural symbols and myths, around which people can be mobilised and national boundaries can be drawn. In what follows, I will argue that — in the case of Hindu nationalism — these three approaches are mutually complementary insofar as they provide an understanding of different aspects of Hindu nationalism, offering very different kinds of insights into its discourse, its history and its organisational dynamics respectively.

The Level of Discourse: The Idea of the Ancient Hindu Nation and its Subsequent 'History'

In terms of historical scholarship, analytical primordialism may seem both untenable and perhaps dangerously close to functioning as a pseudo-scientific handmaiden to *Hindutva's* often exclusivist and aggressively anti-Muslim claims. The above-mentioned Ayodhya controversy revealed how politics, communal relations and competing constructions of Indian history jointly constituted a contested (and ultimately explosive) arena. The ideology of Hindu nationalism and many of its political aims — including the 'reconstruction' of Ram's temple in Ayodhya and the 'Hinduisation' of Indian society and politics — derive considerable discursive energy from the almost constantly repeated claim that India is a Hindu country, traceable to an ancient and highly advanced Hindu civilisation. According to the *Hindutva* version or construction of Indian history then, this glorified ancient Hindu society ended in a series of foreign conquests — initially in the shape of Muslim invasions and the Mughal empire, followed by British colonialism and subsequently through the more subtle ideological oppression at the hands of the 'pseudo-secular' (Hansen 1999) Indian National Congress in the post-independence and post-partition period. What is more, Hindu nationalists also attribute blame internally by perpetually suggesting that the glory of ancient Hindu society was eroded by a lack of internal unity and self-assertion. The RSS methodologies of unifying, strengthening and thus re-awakening the Hindu nation (*Hindu rashtra*) are therefore portrayed as the ideological guarantees for an imminent national revival.

The last two decades have seen the overt politicisation of historical and archaeological scholarship, through which Hindu nationalist claims are proclaimed to be given so-called 'scientific' and 'objective' factuality. Perhaps the best-known contribution made by scholars sympathetic to *Hindutva* was the alleged discovery of Hindu pillars in the disputed *Babri Masjid* in Ayodhya, subsequently portrayed as 'proof' for the Muslim destruction of Ram's temple (see Elst 1990). The significance and accuracy of this often-cited 'evidence' for the allegedly factual history of Ayodhya as Ram's birthplace and/or the location of a pre-Mughal Hindu temple is contested at best, and highly dubious and merely faith-dependent at worst (see Gopal 1991). Primordial

constructions of the Hindu nation and their secular counter-claims form the inescapable backdrop to my discussion. The political implications and contentiousness of historical and archaeological scholarship have been demonstrated repeatedly in post-independence India, particularly in the context of the Ayodhya controversy and in a dispute over versions of Indian history articulated in school textbooks. However, it is not my intention here to engage with, or side in, such controversies. The politics of writing history in contemporary India undoubtedly add an intriguing empirical dimension to the Foucauldian theorising of the power relations intrinsic in the production of knowledge. For the purposes of my own argument, on the other hand, primordialism is of significance not for its historical (in)accuracy or (in)validity, but as an explanatory discourse capable of constructing 'identity slots' (Hansen 1999) and articulating a widely appealing 'general order of existence' (Geertz 1973).

Another way of putting this is to argue for the anthropological and psychological significance of the discursive primordialism inherent in the ideology of Hindu nationalism. As such, we may speak of the emic significance of primordialism in providing insiders or Hindu nationalist sympathisers with interpretative 'frameworks of meaning' (Marshall 1994) that are constitutive of a particular world-view. An anthropologically valid view must surely incorporate an attempt to capture and understand the social and historical realities as experienced, interpreted and constructed by the social actors studied. The human propensity to make the world meaningful and comprehensible takes us within the intellectual orbit of psychology. Different sub-disciplines tend to operate with different conceptual tools to interpret people's explanatory or sense making strategies. Cognitive psychologists often speak of schemas or mental models to account for the networks of interrelated ideas and representations underlying cultural meaning (see Strauss and Quinn 1997). Social psychologists are themselves divided into adherents to the social representations paradigm and to discourse analysis respectively. While the former emphasise the social origins and communication of widely recurring and circulating representations (see, for example, Moscovici 1998), discourse analysis speaks of 'interpretative paradigms' (Potter and Wetherell 1998) considered to reflect different types of ideological engagement with micro- and macro-structures of power. These otherwise rather different approaches share a pre-occupation with people's (intellectual, social and existential) propensity to try to understand the world around them, including the attribution of meaning to — and the construction of order within — history.

In an attempt to synthesise and subsequently apply the above-mentioned sub-disciplines of psychology, I have argued elsewhere (Karner 2002) that the discourse of *Hindutva* articulates a 'cultural model of history' divided into three distinct, yet crucially interrelated stages. This articulation must also be understood — in discourse analytical terms — as not only psychological and social but also intrinsically political in nature. Not only does the Hindu nationalist model of history provide people with ready-made explanations for events and developments in Indian history, it also forms part of a discursive formation aimed at constructing 'identity slots' (Hansen 1999) by defining (and 'historically' grounding) the categories of Hindu 'self' and non-Hindu 'other' (Karner forthcoming). Finally, Hindu nationalism and its version of history are intrinsically political, reflected in the crucial preoccupation with organising (*sangathan*), mobilising and empowering the Hindu nation.

According to the *Hindutva* construction or model of Indian history then, the first of three postulated stages is located in an ancient past portrayed in terms of material plenty, political justice and social harmony, scientific advance, religious tolerance and spiritual enlightenment. The following quotations — taken from the writings of two of the founding fathers and key-ideologues of Hindu nationalism — are representative of the widely circulating and oft repeated notion of a golden age of Hindu antiquity:

‘Certain it is that long before the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians had built their magnificent civilization, the holy waters of the Indus were daily witnessing the lucid and curling columns of the scented sacrificial smokes and the valleys resounding the chants of Vedic hymns — the spiritual fervour that animated their souls. The adventurous valour that propelled their intrepid enterprises, the sublime heights to which their thoughts rose — all these had marked them out as a people destined to lay the foundation of a great and enduring civilization.’ (Savarkar 1942, 4-5)

‘We were the good, the enlightened people. We were the people who knew about the laws of nature and the laws of the Spirit. We built a great civilisation, a great culture and an [sic] unique social order. We had brought into actual life almost everything that was beneficial to mankind.’ (Golwalkar 1966, 9)

The second stage in the Hindu nationalist ‘model’ or schema of history postulates a subsequent period of decay brought about by lack of Hindu unity and self-assertion on one hand, and a series of ‘foreign invasions’ on the other. Importantly, within the *Hindutva* discourse both aspects yield great explanatory power for a range of more recent ‘problems’ and alleged ‘injustices’ including the creation of the state of Pakistan in 1947 and incidences of Hindus converting to Christianity or Islam in contemporary India. Again, the following extracts epitomise ideas almost constantly articulated in Hindu nationalist circles:

‘But as often happens in history this very undisturbed enjoyment of peace and plenty (...) bred a habit of living in the lands of dreams. At last [we were] rudely awakened when Mohmad of Gazani crossed the Indus (...) and invaded India. That day, the conflict of life and death began. Nothing makes Self conscious of itself so much as conflict with the non-self. (...) Hatred separates as well as unites. (...) From year to year, decade to decade, century to century, the contest continued.’ (Savarkar 1942, 32)

‘During the last one thousand years, there had [sic] been many foreign aggressions on our land. (...) The invaders who came during the last ten or twelve centuries could not be driven out. They could not be absorbed either. They remained a separate entity and ruled as foreigners in this land.’ (Golwalkar 1966, 138)

Finally, Hindu nationalist discourse portrays its own organisations as the vanguard of an allegedly now dawning age of national revival and reawakening. History is thus constructed as being on the brink of ‘coming full circle’. In this third and final stage, so the argument goes, recent historical ‘wrongs’ will be rectified, and Hindu society will be restored to its former heights. It is no exaggeration to claim that the notion of an imminent and necessary restoration of Hindu pride and power constitutes the very ideological essence, core or *raison d’être* of Hindu nationalism. This ethos recurs throughout contemporary *Hindutva* publications (e.g. Deoras 1984, Seshadri 1988, Frawley 2000). At the same time, it can be traced back to many of the statements — of which the following constitute but another representative sample — made by the key-ideologue of Hindu nationalism:

‘Our one supreme goal is to bring to life the all-round glory and greatness of our Hindu rashtra [i.e. nation].’ (Golwalkar 1966, 33)

‘The ultimate vision of our work, which has been the living inspiration for all our organisational efforts, is a perfectly organised state of our society wherein each individual has been moulded into a model of ideal Hindu manhood and made into a living limb of the corporate personality of society.’ (Golwalkar 1966, 61)

‘There is only one remedy. To reawaken in ourselves (...) our own national consciousness penetrating deep into the soil. (...) It is only (...) an organisation of the type of the [RSS], capable of embracing all of our people in a loving and eternal brotherhood and making them intensely conscious of their national destiny that can effectively check the present rot of selfishness, dissensions, and vulgar imitations (...).’ (Golwalkar 1966, 228)

The simplified and ideological nature of this construction of Indian history (see Gopal 1991, 12) is apparent and needs little further discussion. Instead, we may wish to locate this discourse within ongoing debates about the social significance and political agendas inherent in constructing different versions of history. Particular mention must be made of the concepts of ‘social memory’ and ‘group memory’, as articulated by Jing (1996) and Gottschalk (2000) respectively. Though arising from very different ethnographic contexts (i.e. those of rural China and India), both authors demonstrate that social groups construct and articulate particular ‘histories’ — perhaps more adequately thought of as different ‘memories’ — as part of their identity politics and their instrumental strategies of furthering economic and political group interests. Both observations hold in the case of *Hindutva* primordialism: as a discourse, Hindu nationalism aims at constructing, homogenising and reifying the often far more ambiguous and fluid identities of social actors; as we have seen, it also is an inherently political corpus of ideas concerned with state power and the anticipated reconfiguration of power relations both in India and in the diaspora. Finally, the intrinsically primordialist version of Indian history intrinsic to Hindu nationalism also conforms to the discursive grammar extrapolated from ideologies of cultural nationalism by John Hutchinson. He argues that their lowest common denominator is the conceptualisation of a national ‘golden past’, ‘present backwardness and division’ and the striving for the moral and social ‘regeneration’ of the nation (Hutchinson 1987, 30ff).

The (Modern) Legacies of Colonialism, Orientalism and Transnationalism

With some of the earlier-mentioned reservations concerning the historical (in-)accuracy (or simplicity) of *Hindutva*’s ‘cultural model of history’ in mind, we are well advised to introduce a different analytical moment to our discussion. On this second level of analysis, we move from the realm of psychology and phenomenology back into a discussion of the historicity of Hindu nationalism as a discourse. In other words, I will now briefly discuss much-debated questions about social contexts and political ‘pre-requisites’ for the historical development of Hindu nationalism. Connecting this to the modernist paradigm for theorising nationalism mentioned earlier, the question underlying my discussion in this section is whether modernity provided a necessary — though in itself arguably not sufficient — pre-condition for the evolution of the system of ideas and organisations associated with *Hindutva*. And

if so, we must ask which aspects or manifestations of modernity were particularly conducive to its ideological genesis.

The first thing to note, in apparent support of the modernists' thesis, is that the intellectual and organisational roots of Hindu nationalism are usually traced to a series of 19th century movements of socio-economic reform and 'neo-Hinduist' religious revivalism. The religious thinker Vivekananda, for example, is often described as a source of inspiration to later Hindu nationalists (van der Veer 1994), as are Dayanand Saraswati's 'puritanical-reformist' *Arya Samaj* (Aryan Society) and the nationalist activists Aurobindo Ghose and B.G. Tilak (Bhatt and Mukta 2000). As was mentioned earlier, the most influential modernist theories have interpreted nationalism as a discourse made possible by the invention of the printing press and the 'evolution' of capitalism (Anderson 1983), as an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Rangers 1983), or as a symptom of industrial society imposing a homogenous tradition of high culture on its populace through educational means (Gellner 1994). In the case of India's experience of modernity, however, three historically inter-connected phenomena of Western origin are frequently portrayed as decisive in the subsequent development of Hindu nationalism — colonialism, orientalism, and exposure to missionary activities. Corbridge and Harris, to provide but one example, thus underline the lasting impact of 'the reification of communities through the classification imposed by [colonialism], the acceptance of Indian reformers of (...) the ideas of Western Orientalist scholars about the [supposedly] essential attributes of Indian civilization [e.g. spiritualism and tolerance], and the emulation of (...) discursive modes and organizational forms of the semitic religions [e.g. foundational scriptures, conversion]' (2000, 179f.).

As for the influence of colonialism, it has frequently been argued that the codification and reification of religious and caste divisions was significantly aided by the workings of the colonial state and its administrative apparatus. Peter van der Veer has provided a succinct summary of these arguments whilst also challenging their more 'extreme' variants that portray 'caste' or 'Hinduism' as sole inventions or constructions of colonialism detached from pre-existing cultural 'realities'. Such disagreements notwithstanding, received academic wisdom acknowledges the historical impact and legacy of colonialism in establishing the concepts of caste and religious minority/majority as part of an emerging conceptual and political vocabulary during the 19th century. Colonial policies of 'divide and rule', the census operations started in 1872, and the British division and application of 'Hindu' and 'Muhammedan' law respectively are thus widely portrayed as instrumental to the increasing politicisation of Hindus and Muslims (often in opposition to one another). Of course, religious practices and identities recognisable as either Hindu or Muslim had preceded colonialism by centuries. However, the 'establishment of both the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority as social and political categories (...) was largely the result of the manner of classification, not of preexisting facts' (van der Veer 1994, 19).

The (political) significance of orientalism — as first and most famously theorised by Edward Said (1995) — has also been widely noted as a powerful force shaping the development of Hindu nationalist thought. If colonial classifications contributed to the increasing delineation and entrenchment of demographic boundaries, Western discourses of the 'oriental other' — simultaneously scholarly and political — helped shape the (ethnic and psychological) content ascribed to the increasingly politicised

religious groups encompassed therein. What is at stake in debates about the orientalist impact on emerging ideologies of ethno-nationalism and religious revivalism of the 19th century is the diffusion of Western ideas of the Eastern ‘other’ to the East. Importantly however, indigenous appropriations of orientalist discourses were inevitably selective and thus a function and expression of the agency of the colonised. Two analyses of Hindu nationalist decodings and appropriations of orientalist ideas deserve particular mention. Firstly, Partha Chatterjee (1993) has famously argued that the orientalist opposition of the materially and politically superior Occident to an intrinsically ‘spiritual’ Orient was given a new ideological slant by Hindu reformers. According to Chatterjee then, 19th century Hindu revivalism added further pairs of opposition to the binary grid provided by orientalism. While the opposition of West to East and the associated dichotomy of scientific rationalism as opposed to ‘spiritual holism’ were often reproduced by Hindu reformers, the latter added a significant gender dimension to their own appropriation of this discourse. Technology, science and materialism thus continued to be associated with the West and to be opposed to the (allegedly) inherently spiritual and tolerant (Hindu) East. However, Hindu revivalism superimposed oppositions of public/private and male/female on this orientalist structure. The public, so the argument went, was not only the realm of Western rationality but also a decidedly male sphere. The private, on the other hand, was constructed as a female domain and a repository of spiritual and national distinctiveness (Chatterjee 1993). As such, national or ethnic superiority could be asserted in the private or domestic realm, which — in arguably symptomatically patriarchal terms — was further conceptualised to be ‘in need of male protection’. Thomas Blom Hansen provides a not dissimilar interpretation of the significance of orientalism to nascent Hindu nationalism during the 19th century. He speaks of an ‘inversion of orientalist epistemology’, which he detects in the influential writings of Swami Vivekananda. Embracing the Western ascription of spiritualism to (Hindu) India, Vivekananda went on to invert the ‘original’ ideological hierarchy of superiority/ inferiority inherent in orientalist thought. To him, ‘the West had become intoxicated and degenerate by virtue of its own success in the economic, political, and military fields. The greatness of India lay in its spiritual superiority, and he exhorted: “Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality. Spirituality must conquer the West. (...) Heroic workers are wanted to go abroad and help to disseminate the great truths of [Hinduism] (...) the only condition of awakened and vigorous national life is the conquest of the world by Indian thought”.’ (Hansen 1999, 69)

The third external influence on the emerging ideology of Hindu nationalism during the 19th and into the 20th century was the above-mentioned presence of foreign missionaries. Exposure to Christian and Islamic proselytising movements as well as the concept of a foundational religious scripture thus came to shape the organisational and discursive characteristics of various movements of social reform and Hindu revivalism during this period, most notably including the *Brahmo Samaj* and the *Arya Samaj*. These developments are well documented in the literature and have been variously analysed as the simultaneous ‘stigmatisation and emulation’ of the Muslim and Christian ‘other’ (Jaffrelot 1996), ‘syndicated Hinduism’ (Thapar 1991), or the ‘semitization of Hinduism’ (Hansen 1999). Given the wealth of existing material on this aspect of *Hindutva*, I have chosen to highlight a fourth — and relatively less documented, yet arguably significant — dimension to the historical development of Hindu nationalism: the experience and/or consciousness of being part of a

transnationally dispersed Hindu nation, which — as the above-mentioned phenomena of the *Virat Hindu Sammelan* and local RSS branches illustrate — has achieved a relatively high level of organisation despite persisting intra-group heterogeneities (of caste, class, region, language, ‘sect’). The question arises if the minority experiences of Hindu diaspora communities — as largely, though not exclusively, symptoms of modernity — have also helped to give shape to the *Hindutva* discourse. Romila Thapar, for example, has recently suggested that overseas Hindus function as economic role models for many middle-class and upwardly mobile Hindu nationalists in India. Furthermore, Thapar argues that being a minority ‘abroad’, with the often-implicated experiences of racial exclusionism and discrimination, has helped to foster a ‘ghetto mentality’ that has subsequently been imported back to India. According to Thapar (2000) then, the ideas analysed earlier of Hindus ‘under siege’ or under threat by ‘foreign invaders’ and ‘oppressors’ have received considerable discursive impetus or salience through the experiences of Hindus in East Africa, North America and Western Europe. Steven Vertovec proposes a similar argument in a recent book entitled ‘The Hindu Diaspora’ (2000). He argues that profound social changes, including the experience of migration and resettlement, can result in a process of ‘ideologization’. Cultural practices that were previously taken for granted, embodied, often largely unconscious or at least seldom reflected upon — which in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms (1977) constitute a given *habitus* — are brought to the forefront of people’s consciousness. In the process, ‘culture as practise’ is transformed into ‘ethnic ideology’ (Vertovec 2000, 64). This argument resonates with Savarkar’s earlier quoted statement that ‘nothing makes Self conscious of itself so much as conflict [or contact] with the non-self’ (1942, 32). The words of one of my own informants, a self-declared moderate Hindu nationalist resident in the East Midlands, also links this process of ‘ideologization’ to the (in his case seemingly) modern phenomenon of resettlement in ‘the West’:

‘This whole thing about thinking who you are — Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian — seems to be a Western phenomenon. Growing up in Punjab, I never thought about being a Hindu. I just did what everybody else did, we’d go to the *mandir*, we’d perform *puja* at home and that was that. It’s only in the West that I became aware of my identity. I suppose it’s also that in India people are generally just born into a community, without a choice. In this country, we think more about who we are, who our community is.’ (interview conducted 26/10/00)

Cultural Repertoires and their Political Uses

Having thus analysed several distinctly modern phenomena at the root of Hindu nationalism, some other important issues nonetheless remain unaccounted for. In particular, the question why *Hindutva* has taken its present organisational and discursive forms cannot be reduced to the manifestations of modernity discussed in the previous section. Given the profound ideological differences between the *sangh parivar* and the (at least nominally secular) Indian National Congress, the impact of modernity does not provide us with a *sufficient* account or a convincing single-causal explanation of all nationalist discourses in India. Different groups of people have been rallied around different symbols and agendas at different points in the history of post-independence India. While we may rightly point to some correlations between caste-/ class and ideological preference, Hindu nationalism has historically been

predominantly a phenomenon of the urban middle class and upper castes, such alternative (class) reductionism would be similarly unsatisfactory. Broad trends do not constitute causal explanations and should not permit a simplistic glossing over issues of individual as well as group agency or contextual variation and change in ideological 'commitment'. All this points us in the direction of ethno-symbolism widely associated with Anthony Smith and his interpretation of nationalism as necessarily informed by, and organised around, selected and pre-existing cultural symbols. Smith's lasting contribution to the study of nationalism has been his focus on the mobilising power of such selected symbols and myths, which themselves imply the existence of pre-modern *ethnies* (1981). This is not to suggest that nationalist symbols exercise an irresistible ideological power over social actors, interpellating them as mere puppets. Clearly, the above-mentioned objections concerning contextual variation and agency would have to be levelled against such a 'conclusion' as well. However, Smith and his followers have rightly observed that there are often important symbolic continuities or overlaps between nationalist discourses and the historically 'older' cultural formations, from which they originate and in which they self-consciously ground themselves. As such, nationalism should not be wholly reduced to some of the often very abstract historical forces associated with modernity.

Hindu nationalism provides several examples of symbols, practices and discursive formations that resonate with, or directly utilise, historically pre-existing cultural forms or sign-systems. This suggests that the ideological salience and successful diffusion of *Hindutva* has been greatly enhanced by the fact that it taps into 'established' cultural repertoires. At the same time (and in confirmation of Smith's argument) the use of historically 'older' narratives, symbols and practices for nationalist purposes also involves processes of selection, interpretation and (re-) appropriation. In the remainder of this section, I shall draw attention to some of these symbolic continuities or appropriations as exhibited by the *sangh parivar* and documented in the literature.

Significant manifestations of such resonance with, or utilisation of, pre-existing cultural forms are 'written' into the very structure, method and organisation of the RSS. More accurately, on several layers in its hierarchical structure we detect echoes of the 'traditional' guru-disciple relationship characteristic of many forms of Hindu belief and practice. The local *shakha* — as the basic unit or 'bottom level structure' of the RSS — is divided into age-groups headed by group leaders and teachers, who occupy the organisational stratum below the full-time organisers (or *pracharaks*). Bhatt and Mukta describe the latter as 'the main organizational, activist and networking layer (...) frequently on loan to work on other projects or organisations [within the *sangh parivar*]' (2000, 415). Moving further up the RSS hierarchy, there are local secretaries and 'higher teachers' themselves subsumed in local/city committees and the higher echelons of the state and central assemblies as well as the general secretary (Andersen and Damle 1987, 86ff; Bhatt and Mukta 2000, 415f). Most significantly and at the apex of the RSS hierarchy, there is the *sarsanghchalak* or supreme guide/philosopher as the embodiment of the organisation's emphasis on the significance of 'correct [ideological] guidance' of its volunteers as well as the nation at large. The position of supreme guide was first occupied by Hedgewar, the founding father of the RSS, who appointed M.S. Golwalkar as his successor in 1940. Golwalkar's extensive (and widely circulating) writings provided much of the data underlying my own work on Hindu nationalism (Karner 2002) and parts of them were

quoted earlier in this paper to illustrate *Hindutva*'s discursive primordialism. A complementary ethno-symbolist approach to Hindu nationalism is strongly supported by the fact that Golwalkar was and still is widely referred to as 'Guruji' in RSS circles, thus illustrating the ideological significance of 'pre-modern' categories and concepts. My research into Hindu nationalism in the local (diaspora) context of the East Midlands also revealed the discursive persistence of cultural ideas of guidance by a guru. An HSS organiser based in Leicester thus told me that to understand the RSS, I had to understand Indian families and the premium attached to the 'correct' upbringing, socialisation and 'guidance' of the young (interview conducted 29/11/00). A Hindu nationalist volunteer and resident of Nottingham also used the Hindu 'guru idiom' to explain the significance of the RSS saffron flag (*Bhagwa Dwaj*) to me. Repeating an often-cited explanation, he asserted that 'the flag is our guru' (interview conducted 25/11/00).

Christophe Jaffrelot (1996) has observed another important continuity between the RSS and pre-existing cultural institutions. He argues that RSS *shakhas* are institutionally 'reminiscent' of the traditional *akharas* or wrestling schools:

'The term *akhara* designates a place where young men of a locality gather daily for body-building, exercise and sports — mainly wrestling and weight-lifting. (...) the *akhara* retains a ritual dimension — even a spiritual one. It includes a temple (...) dedicated to Hanuman (the monkey god allied to Ram in the Ramayana, where he embodies strength); it is placed under the authority of a *guru* who instructs the members of the *akhara* in physical and mental discipline. (...) Members of an *akhara* (...) develop a strong collective attachment to it.' (Jaffrelot 1996, 35)

Jaffrelot thus interprets RSS branches — as places of nationalist ritual, discipline, physical exercise and ideological 'education' (McDonald 1999) — as a 'reinterpretation' of this pre-existing cultural repertoire provided by the institution of the *akhara*. Indeed, the continuities or common values and characteristics are easy to discern: both institutions provide young men with a clearly delineated and strongly disciplined social space, exhort ideas of masculinity and 'martiality', exhibit 'ritual and spiritual' dimensions as well a hierarchical (guru-centred) internal structure and foster a strong sense of collective identity.

Given *Hindutva*'s discursive and organisational focus on reorganising the Hindu nation from within, it is perhaps ironic that a major impetus to the diffusion of Hindu nationalist ideas originated outside the *sangh*'s organisational boundaries: in the much discussed *Doordarshan* (i.e. the national TV station) broadcasting — starting in January 1987 — of the *Ramayana* epic. The mass-appeal of the 78 weekly episodes (as well as the subsequent screening of the *Mahabharata* in 91 episodes) has been well documented. Rajagopal, in a recent and comprehensive analysis, argues that the broadcasting of the *Ramayana* played an important role in the unfolding mobilisation around the Ayodhya issue. He argues for a contextual understanding of this mass-scale celebration of an epic golden age through the medium of TV, embedded in neoliberalism, consumerism and the encroaching forces of globalisation (Rajagopal 2001). The series drew huge audiences, resulting in 'all activity being suspended on Sunday mornings when the broadcast was taking place' (Jaffrelot 1996, 389). The *Ramayana* thus 'not only became the most popular program ever seen on Indian television, but also turned out to be a social event of great significance' (van der Veer 1994, 175). Rajagopal goes further in detecting a deeper political significance in the

mass consumption of this televised ancient Hindu epic. He argues that the *Ramayana* became ‘the medium within which a new set of political opportunities came to be articulated’ (2001, 74). The centrality of *Ayodhya* to the *Ramayana* narrative goes at least some way to accounting for the fact that the broadcast coincided with the BJP’s rise to political prominence. In other words, the TV epic undoubtedly contributed to the story of Ram and the symbolic significance of *Ayodhya* — as defined by the ‘agents’ of *Hindutva* — gaining prominence in the popular imagination. Some of the narrative key-components of the televised serial including an ancient golden age, the battle between good (i.e. Ram) and evil (i.e. Ravana) and the final establishment of *Ram Rajya* (Thapar 1991) all resemble *Hindutva*’s ‘cultural model of history’ analysed earlier. The TV serialisation and broadcast of the *Ramayana* thus arguably constituted the most apparent manifestation of Hindu nationalism discursively overlapping with, or tapping into, a pre-existing symbolic universe.

Finally and in further support of the ethno-symbolist approach, several rituals of mass mobilisation organised during the 1980s made similar use of widely familiar and salient symbols, practices and concepts, whilst also partly transforming or adding to their meaning in the process. In 1983, the *sangh parivar* articulated the idea(l) of Hindu unity and attempted to construct and reify a new, politicised ‘national Hinduism’ (Hansen 1999) through a ritual campaign known as the *Ekatmata Yajna* (or ‘Sacrifice for Unity’). This campaign consisted of three main and hundreds of subsidiary motorised processions, transporting images of the deity of Mother India (*Bharat Mata*) and sacred water from the Ganges in different directions all over India. As an ‘appropriation of the sacred geography of Hinduism’, the campaign utilised the ‘carefully selected’ symbols of Mother India and the Ganges as lowest common symbolic denominators suited to the *sangh*’s ideological attempt to transcend intra-Hindu diversities of caste, ‘sect’ and region (Jaffrelot 1996, 360f). Importantly, the *Yajna* also resonated with traditional practices and concepts, including Hindu pilgrimages and religious sacrifice. Given such continuities, the *sangh parivar* succeeded in creating new, yet ‘meaningful’ symbols and rituals that ‘[did] not compete with established ones, allowing people to take on their new “Hindu” identity without unduly disturbing their present one’ (Lochtefeld 1996, 103). Among several other campaigns that conformed to a similar ethno-symbolist logic we may highlight the above-mentioned ‘Bricks for Lord Ram’ campaign. The (transnational) collection of money and stones dedicated to the ‘reconstruction’ of Ram’s temple in *Ayodhya* climaxed in form of the *shilanyas* — the arrival and worship of the bricks on a disputed piece of land in front of the *Babri Masjid* on 9 November 1989. Jaffrelot has interpreted the *shilanyas* and its use of sacred water and earth, Vedic references and the site becoming a place of veneration within the pilgrimage town of *Ayodhya* as ‘the occasion for a new manipulation of [established] symbols (...) fusing [signs] with Hindu nationalist connotations and procedures of sacred origin’ (1996, 399f). In other words, symbols and practices widely familiar to many Hindus from a domestic or local/temple context were (re-)appropriated in, and projected onto, the sphere of the ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1983) national community.

Concluding Remarks

The argument presented in this paper has been simultaneously empirical and conceptual. I have discussed the ideological formation of Hindu nationalism — as

most widely associated with the family of organisations (*sangh parivar*) built around the BJP and RSS — from the theoretical vantage point of some long-standing ‘disagreements’ concerning the ‘nature’ and historical origins of nationalism. The resulting analysis may be described as a ‘reconceptualisation from within’, whereby theoretical positions sometimes thought to be mutually exclusive have been shown to be mutually complementary. Such an analysis is analogous to a ‘reconceptualisation’ undertaken by Bloch and Parry in the very different disciplinary context of economic anthropology, which has long been characterised by a theoretical divide between the positions of formalism and substantivism respectively. The former holds that a ‘market mentality’ and profit maximisation are universal characteristics of economic behaviour and as such not specific to capitalism. However, the substantivist counter-argument holds that capitalism results in a ‘great transformation’ of use-value into exchange value, gift giving to profit maximisation, and a socially embedded economy to a capitalist market obeying the seemingly ‘rational’ principles of supply and demand only. Bloch and Parry (1989) challenge this theoretical divide and argue that the formalist and substantivist positions are complementary insofar as they correspond to — and highlight — different levels and aspects *within* economic systems. They thus suggest that every economic system exhibits both formal and substantive elements, conforming to market principles but also helping to reproduce social relations based upon notions of a transcendental order.

In this paper, I have undertaken a similar deconstruction of a profound theoretical divide in the very different context of the study of nationalist ideologies. Discussing the discursive and organisational formations of Hindu nationalism, I have argued that the primordialist, modernist, and ethno-symbolist positions are mutually complementary rather than antagonistic. As such, they have been shown to offer insights into different aspects of *Hindutva* and thus to be mutually ‘enriching’. I have stressed the anthropological and psychological significance of primordialism in offering an account of the worldviews and interpretative frameworks constructed by the social actors studied. I went on to underline the continuing theoretical importance of the modernist paradigm in drawing attention to a number of historical pre-conditions for the relatively recent articulation and diffusion of nationalist discourses and sentiments. Finally, I have argued that ethno-symbolism rightly underlines the significance of pre-existing (and as such pre-modern) cultural symbols for the purposes of mobilising the nation envisioned, constructed and reified by the discourse of *Hindutva*.

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