How are Nationalist Politics and Religious Faith Related?

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This essay illustrates how religion is used as a prop to further agendas of Indian political parties. It critiques Kohli's (1998) 'inverse U-curve' concept of social movements and agrees with Basu (1996) regarding how political movements are often mistaken for religious ones. It examines cases of nationalist politics within Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to illustrate uses of religion as an 'emotive' or 'defensive' instrument and to focus on the role of the media in creating a 'split public'. Finally, it critiques Van de Veer's argument that 'nationalism must rest upon religious identification' and concludes that whilst religion may be a subset of nationalism, it would be limited to assume that it drives it.

The role of religion in nationalism depends largely on how 'nationalism' and the 'nation' are defined. For example, Geertz (1963) defines nationalism and the nation in terms of primordial and civic ties. Religion is therefore seen as a 'primordial tie', and he describes Indian partition as an 'outstanding' case of this type of 'attachment'. However, Geertz's definition is arguably limited, and Hutchinson et al (2003) differ with Geertz by illustrating an increased replacement of such ties by a level of political supremacy. Thus, it could be argued that national unity is maintained less by calls to blood or land in India, but more by a 'vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance' to a civil state, supplemented by governmental use of police powers and ideological exhortation. (Hutchinson and Smith, 2003)

For example, several authors distinguish 'Hindu Nationalism' from 'Indian Nationalism'. Whilst it could be argued that both definitions are mutually exclusive, I stress that they should be examined together to form a greater understanding of the Indian state. Jaffrelot (1996) argues that historically, nationalism of the Congress party (or 'Indian nationalism') was territorial and "civic", identifying all Indians as inhabitants of the British Indian Empire, which is consistent with Hutchinson and Smith's definition above. On the other hand, Hindu nationalism identifies the Indian nation according to ethnic criteria, and policies aim to revive a religiously defined civilization or culture – of the Hindus as 'a people' – and not to promote religious faith alone (Gooptu 2009).

Based on this premise, the argument that Hindu nationalist politics is *entirely* independent of religion would be naïve. For this reason, I will stress that the link between nationalist policies and religion is tenuous and, more often than not, largely exaggerated. For example, Basu in Ludden (1996) goes so far as to give the example of the BJP (The Bharatiya Janata Party) as 'redefining' nationalism to eliminate safeguards of minority rights ("if not to eliminate minorities themselves") and identifying the nation with the interests of the Hindu majority. Whilst this may relate more to Geertz's description of nationalism, Basu's view is a bit of an extreme one, and, as such, this essay will later question the importance and consistency of religion in the BJP campaign.

Amongst others, Bose and Jalal (1997) parallel Hindu nationalism with social movements, with religion acting as a contributing factor to the popularity of its policies. This idea is consistent with Katzenstein, Kothari, and Metha's (2001) description of 'movement activism', which is concerned with issues of national identity. Van de Veer (1994) gives the example of Indian migrants who continue to have ties with their homeland. He believes that identity challenges are met by national activism and the increased adoption of religion.

However, is nationalism a social movement, and not, as Basu argues, 'an elite conspiracy'? If the latter is the case,

nationalism is less ideological and more strategic. The implementation of Hindu nationalist policies can be utilized flexibly by politicians to garner support for campaigns, such as Indira Gandhi's approach in the 1980's, or to deal with what I deem as 'punctuated religious events', such as the BJP's response to the Ayodhya temple riots. Accordingly, this essay will place 'Hindu nationalist policies' and 'BJP policies' in the same group. It would be correct to argue that Congress and other political parties may, to some extent, practice Hindu nationalism. However, such analysis is outside the realms of this essay, and for the sake of consistency, it will focus largely on one division.

Kohli (1998) argues that most religious and/or social movements follow the shape of an inverse U curve. When movements are initiated, group identities are heightened and mobilized groups confront state authority. However, after a period of power negotiation, movements decline as exhaustion sets in. An example of this phenomenon would be the BJP's involvement in the Ayodhya temple issue. After an initially strong reaction from the BJP, the party reverted to its moderate line in the 1990s, discarding the manipulation of religious symbols in favour of, what Jaffrelot (2007) deems as, more 'legitimate issues', such as economic independence and national unity. Hence, according to Kohli's argument, Hindu nationalist policies and religion are crucially linked through the medium of a social movement, and thus follow an 'inverse U' trend.

Nonetheless, Kohli's description of social movements are lacking due to its assumptions and we should question this direct linkage between religion and Hindu nationalist policies. First, Kohli's argument of an 'inverse U' tendency rests on the assumptions of well-institutionalized state authority and a "firm but accommodating" national leader (Kohli, 1998). The existence of one, let alone both, of these factors in the context of India is a broad assumption, indeed. Second, whilst a single, punctuated religious event such as the Ayodhya conflict may follow Kohli's trend, nationalism and the Hindutva culture in particular does not seem to be tapering off in the predicted inverse U shape. The problem may be with a lack of generality in Kohli's argument or a flaw in the argument itself; however, we my turn to agreeing with Basu in terms of how it is possible that Hindu nationalism is not a social movement altogether, but, rather, a foundation driven more by political interests than religious ones. This would be consistent with that of Anderson (1991), who argues that nationalism arises when two large cultural systems that precede it, the religious community and the dynastic realm, disappear.

I stress that the appeal of Hindu nationalist policies may be due to factors pertaining to gender and class. For example, Malik and Singh (1995) argue that Hindu nationalist policies have created spaces for women's activism by creating causes that require tremendous commitment from followers (akin to the anti-colonial national movement), and, as such, nationalist policies may play a gendered, as opposed to just a religious role, in mobilizing women from families who practice gender seclusion. In terms of class and caste, it could be argued that the BJP's acute response to the Ayodhya issue was due to resentment of the Mandal Commission, and, under such considerations, nationalist policies could be seen as driven by class rather than religion.

Critics such as Dubey (1992) argue that India's modernizing middle class is loosening its ties to tradition. However, it is interesting to note that this middle class, or as Yadav calls them, the 'second democratic upsurge', have acquired economic status, but not social status, and may view religious activity as a means to obtain both. For example, Van der Veer (1994) points out how the initial building of hotels en route to Ayodhya could have been a sign that politicians were prepared to provide for the 'middle-class needs of those on pilgrimage'. Therefore, the BJP's ability to recognize and reinforce these class, rather than religion, based needs would explain the acceptance of nationalist policies and would lessen their link to religion. This is consistent with Basu's claim that the BJP's best response to the Mandal case was Hindu nationalism and Van der Veer's description of the Ayodhya temple being a 'defence response' to more dangerous currents in the country (i.e. the Mandal Commission). This defence response can, and has been, applied to numerous other issues such as anger over crises, such as with Punjab and Kashmir (the BJP skilfully directed this anger at minority nationalism) or Rajiv Gandhi's involvement in the opening of the Babri Masjid to Hindu worshippers (a response to the Shah Bano controversy), to name but a few. Therefore, the actions of nationalist politics may be driven by defence strategies and sustained by class or gender dynamics and, in this way, have little to do with faith or communal enmity.

It could be argued that the BJP's Hindu nationalism appeals are in direct correlation to the popularity of Congress and, as such, are more political then religious in nature. Interestingly, Basu's (1993) state-level comparison study

finds that larger BJP popularity with anti-Congress forces leads to lesser appeals by the party to Hindu interests. Conversely, the more opposition to both Congress and the BJP that exists, the more apt the BJP is to issue nationalist appeals. Thus, Basu describes one end of the spectrum with Himachal Pradesh, where there had been a gradual evolution of a two-party system and in which the BJP is the only real opposition to Congress. Here, Hindu nationalism is rendered unnecessary. At the other end of the spectrum, the BJP faces greater difficulties in establishing itself in states such as Uttar Pradesh (OBCs as a political force) and, therefore, freely and militantly voices Hindu nationalist appeals. As such, the rise of nationalist policies can be attributed to political popularity, and less with religious beliefs.

Gooptu's (1997) work in Uttar Pradesh suggests that the nature of Hinduism itself may be changing, and, accordingly, the link between religion and Hindu nationalist policies can be better examined. For example, the BJP's involvement in Ayodhya can be attributed to 'muscular Hinduism', led by politicians and publicists, gaining support from the poor who presented themselves as a 'resurgent army'. However, the sustainability of such a resurgent army, encompassing different, often contradictory initiatives of diverse groups, is questionable. Jaffrelot (1998) correctly points out that consistent cases of BJP's 'broken promises', such as waiving farmers' loans in excess of 10,000 rupees, providing economic assistance to poorer rural families, and presenting titles of forest land to tribes, to name but a few, lead to falling popularity of the BJP after Ayodhya. Therefore, resentment of Hindu nationalist politics may be less to do with anger over religious atrocities and, to a greater extent, with the BJP's inability to maintain promises over socio-economic issues (Shah, 1998).

Conversely, some have argued that the BJP's nationalist-economic policy is religious. For example, Malik and Singh (1995) examine the BJP's emphasis on 'swadeshi', which encourages increased protection for India's big and medium-sized industries. The party's economic policy further rejects 'unabashed consumerism', a critique of the Congress' consistent borrowing from the IMF, and focuses instead on Swalambhan (self-reliance). While emphasis by the Swadeshi movement on Indian 'self-confidence' and 'pride' in its industries certainly has nationalistic elements, the extent to which this is based purely on religion and appeasement of RSS pracharaks is questionable. For example, McGuire and Copland (2007) and Nayar (2001) are amongst many to stress the BJP's adoption of Swadeshi as an attempt by the party to *distinguish* itself from the Congress' economic policies. Nayar (2001) goes so far as to press that there is "nothing really distinctive about the BJP governance in relation to economic policy, there is little to set it apart from the Congress Party".

Therefore, McGuire and Copland (2007) press that a need to *differentiate* may be behind the BJP's strategy of developing an 'organistic' model of a well-integrated economy and society, that supposedly draws from India's own indigenous traditions. As such, I feel that the swadeshi concept, and the Hindu nationalist policies that arise from it, is an attempt to resist mimicry of foreign models and Congress, and less to do with religious ideals. Hansen (1998) emphasizes this idea through resentment of the BJP noted from its allies within the Sangh Parivar, who not only question the government's commitment to swadeshi, but also would like to propose a more 'Hindu' model of development as an alternative (as illustrated in the case of Swadeshi Jagaran Manch campaign against Enron in 1994).

Finally, there is the role of the media as a tool within Hindu nationalist politics, in particular the use of religious media . As argued by Chakravarty and Gooptu (2000) the media has become one of the primary sites for the exposition of different socio-political discourses in India. Several authors, including Babb and Wadley (1995), have argued that state sponsored networks (such as Doordarshan, for example) have contributed significantly to the rise of Hindu nationalism. Rajagopal (2000) in particular examines the relationship between state-sponsored television, print media, and the national public culture in India. However, Gooptu and Chakraverty (2000) rightly point out that in the context of India, with its mass illiteracy and diverse linguistic population, visual media like the cinema and television have far greater potential than the written text in fostering a pro-Hindu identity (Bandyopadhyay, 1994).

Through his surveys, Rajagopal illustrates how the Ramayan, a religious epic initially sponsored by Congress to appeal to large bases of Hindu viewers, was used by the BJP to revive its brand of cultural nationalism: Hindutva. The author claims that the unprecedented popularity of the television serial Ramayan rekindled the Hindutva movement's dormant campaign for the liberation of Ramjanmabhumi (the birthplace of Ram) and led to the

subsequent destruction of the Babri mosque.

Similar arguments have been made by Gooptu (2001), with respect to nautanki plays that celebrate India's folk heroes and play upon dispossession and displacement, alien domination, and articulation of nationalist aspirations. A parallel example is drawn by Gooptu and Chakravarty (2000) with the movie Roja, which can be seen as aimed to foster nationalist sentiments with respect to Kashmir. Therefore, it could be argued that in the case of the media, religion and nationalist policies can be, and often are, intertwined to further political interests.

However, nonetheless, a direct link between religious awareness and pro-nationalist propaganda is tenuous. For example, one could question whether Rajagopal's causality is entirely accurate. As the author himself admits, the Indian public is a 'split public' and data from his interviews with people who watched Ramayan on Doordharshan reveals contradictory and ambivalent responses about religious traditions and modern nationalism, due largely to a culturally diverse audience. Similarly, Gooptu and Chakravarty (2000) stress that they do not draw a direct link between media constructions and the BJP, nor regarding the existence of any religious fundamentalist conspiracy in the media.

In sum, this essay has argued that Hindu nationalist politics is largely independent of religion. It has done this by stressing that popular policies may be based on gender or class needs rather than religious ones, illustrating that nationalist-economic policies may be used as a form of differentiation, as opposed to a spiritual mechanism, and emphasizing the direct correlation between the popularity of Congress and the use of nationalist policies by the BJP. It has been stressed in this essay that interaction between Hindu nationalist mobilizations and subaltern movements (Yadav, 1996) may be attributed to the changing and more militant nature of Hinduism itself. In addition, there has been an emphasis on how the role of religion in Hindu nationalist politics is based on how the 'nation' and 'nationalism' is defined, as well as the prevalence of the media. Finally, Corbridge and Harriss' (2000) reference to the language of Hindu nationalism (as creating a 'division of discourse') supports the argument that Hindu nationalism has enforced a new relationship between elites and the masses and is, therefore, less likely to follow the pattern of social movements described by Kohli. Finally, whilst the use of religion as a 'defence mechanism' may reinforce 'exclusion for inclusion' concepts, to argue that it is the *cause and consequence* of Hindu nationalist politics would be limited, and, as such, the two are largely independent.

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