

Saffronization of a Land: Is it possible to separate Hinduism from Hindutva in India?

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Abstract: In view of the growing popularity of Hindu nationalism in India, the purpose here is to ask if Hinduism and Hindutva can be considered as separate entities. In recent times especially under the BJP-led government, India, is witnessing the rise of a regime that negates and deliberately silences all non-majoritarian and dissenting voices. Its sole agenda is to drive Hindutva politics home and for doing so it aims at turning India into a Hindu state built around upper caste Brahmanical patriarchal ideology. Hindutva politics dismisses plurality inherent in orthopraxy and imposes a singular explanation of Hindu philosophy based on caste oppression and communalism. This paper argues that under the current regime, India is witnessing cultural homogenization and Saffronization of civil society with the final goal of normalization of Islamophobia. The paper ends with the observation that such systematic hate mongering is largely possible through media propaganda.

Keywords: Hindutva, Hinduism, Orthopraxy, Cultural Homogenization, Saffronization, Islamophobia, Mainstream media in India

The historical trajectory of Hinduism, Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism in India can be traced back to the writings of Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose and Dayanand Saraswati. Later, the first comprehensive text on Hindutva as a political ideology was formulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923 and further documented by Golwalkar (1966). Extensive literature on Hindu nationalism as a center-stage for understanding how Hinduness or Hindutva came to be associated with Indianness can be found in the writings of Christophe Jaffrelot (1991), Romila Thapar (1996), to name a few. Hindutva translated to Political Hindu through the establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 and later the birth of the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980. Therefore, Hindutva as both a political ideal and a political action has existed in India for a considerable period of time, often manifested through identity politics, nationalist assertions and nation building processes. However, a steady revival of the ideology coupled with a systematic propagation of Hindutva through mainstream political action can be witnessed since 2014 as the BJP formed the government at the centre.

Located in the broader debate on Hindu nationalism, Hindutva's political assertion based on the Brahmanical caste system makes an significant case for understanding Hinduism both as an ideology and a practice. Consequently, in this paper we are interested in understanding the distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva in India, and ask if such a distinction is feasible to maintain empirically specifically when the ruling party in India imposes the Hindutva ideology

across the country through various legal and sociopolitical interventions.

One of the recent illustrations can be sourced from the way text books are edited in India today. The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT)³text books have recently been edited to delete any documentation and reference to the Mughal history in India. Through such deliberate dismissal of the Mughal era, the ruling party is trying to obliterate a significant part of India's history. This not only emphasizes the ruling party's deep seated Islamophobia but also renders the general understanding of Hinduism narrow, orthodox and problematic.

Text books of school curricula offers a foundational framework to what the youth of a country learns. On the other hand, history as a documentation of the past and a reflection on the current success and failure of any state is crucial for understanding a nation's location at large. Therefore, manipulation of the history text books of the school curricula is a highly effective strategy for those wanting to manipulate the larger narrative (Bose 2008). Such illustrations also provoke questions like – is there only one version of Hinduism? Is Hinduism synonymous to Hindutva? If yes, then why does the BJP-RSS use the term Hindutva and not Hinduism? If no, then what is the difference between the two? With reference to these questions, this paper makes three major arguments and will attempt answering the questions through theoretical and empirical interventions. It argues, firstly, that India is experiencing a major drive towards cultural homogenization facilitated by the current government at the centre. The second argument is that this homogenizing process is epitomized in Islamophobia followed by Saffronization of civil society including education; lastly, the most significant agent that drives these processes of cultural homogenization and Saffronization is the mainstream media in India. Here it is important to consider that Islamophobia is germane to the Hindutva philosophy of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) that has regularly surfaced through conversion of the Indian Adivasis to Hindu religion, violence against minorities to name a few. Anti-Islam is one of the key and foundational premises of Hindutva that scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot (1991, 2018) has engaged with for long. Therefore, the location of Islamophobia in Hindutva is already well established. However, what deserves further attention is to investigate the relation between Hindutva and Hinduism and compare their locations within the larger scheme of political action of Hindu Nationalism in India.

The core of Hinduism is based on orthopraxy i.e. absence of a text delineating the do's and don'ts of Hinduism. However, located within the framework of the Brahmanical caste system, Hinduism translates into a handy tool of exploitation, othering and rigidity. Consequently, while conceptually it is possible to save Hinduism from caste hierarchy, empirically it is not. This is precisely why Ambedkar (1936, also 2014) critiqued Hindu caste system and wanted a complete annihilation of the Brahmanical order. From that standpoint, the caste system is the essential connection between Hinduism and Hindutva that upholds the paradox.

In addition, there is a distinction between Sanskritized Hinduism and popular Hinduism, mostly expressed and observed in different social practices. This distinction is also propagated across generations through folklores. It might be interpreted as a difference between Great Tradition and Little Tradition as depicted by Yogendra Singh (1973) in *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, “in the Hindu case, this schema is complicated by the lack of unity in the Great Tradition” (Jaffrelot 1999, 1). Jaffrelot adds that this peculiarity emerges from the lack of codified text on Hinduism, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper. Lack of a 'book', pointed out by Renou (1972), can actually serve as a common reference point. Hinduism can either be a conglomeration of sects known as *sampradaya* (to transmit) where the sect survives through “uninterrupted transmission from one master to another” (Clementine-Ojha 1990) of the mes-

sage of the funding *guru* which itself derives from a revelation; or a Hindu sect may also take the form of a *path* i.e. a way in which the founder is not the recipient of the divine revelation or the message. In such cases, sects grow and sustain in isolation from one another and often become rivals. As rivals they compete for which sect should dominate in terms of the way of life or the teaching. This way, Hinduism, at the level of practice, turns not into a religion but a juxtaposition of religions built around the defining premise of a lack of structure (Jaffrelot 1991).

The structural fluidity in Hinduism has facilitated its evolution and consequent expression through people's practices of the dharma; however, it has also, from time to time, run the risk of interpretation of convenience under the vigilance of political leaders. This again goes back to Savarkar's (1923) writings on Hindutva and Hinduism where he maintains that Hinduism is only a derivative of Hindutva. The practice of diffusing the ism of Hinduism with the right-wing political action of Hindutva follows from that tradition. Consequently, Hindu politics or Hindutva, the defining premise of right-wing political discourse in India, has taken recourse to convenient and right-radical interpretation of the code of conduct for establishing the hegemony of Hindutva. Jaffrelot (1999) further observes: "In the late 1980s and early 1990s India witnessed an unprecedented rise in militant Hinduism. This phenomenon is a challenging rise for social scientists in so far as the essential characteristics of Hinduism scarcely lends themselves to a closed and monolithic radicalism of the type associated with Muslim, Jewish or Christian 'fundamentalisms'. In fact, Hinduism is distinguished by a socio-cultural differentiation and a capacity for integration which hardly seem compatible with the expression of a militant collective consciousness."

In that light, there is a sharp distinction between what constitutes Hinduism and what is defined as Hindutva by the political parties in India. Interestingly, the plurality of interpretation compounded by the absence of a single text has lent both validity and complexity (if not danger) to the discourse of Hinduism. Right from M.N. Srinivas (1969) to Christophe Jaffrelot (1991) to T. N. Madan (1992), literatures on Hinduism in India have captured the historical and mythological evolution of the Hindu ideology mainly through the processes of Sanskritization, westernization and concomitant social changes. In this context, S.C. Dube (1965) comments, "Sanskrit sources provide not one model but many models, some of them involving even fundamentally opposed ideals. What we call Hindu philosophy is not just one school of thought, it is a compendium of many systems of thought, recognizing and advocating many divergent images of society and many different schemes of values."

At the empirical level, the element of pluralism in Hinduism is replaced by hegemonized structures built around the caste system. This implies a translation of the distinction in understanding of what Hinduism stands for into exploitation. Hinduism in practice is embedded in the caste system. The caste system sustains through domination of the upper caste Brahmins on lower castes including the Dalits. In fact, the caste system is a peculiar combination of ascription and achievement; for people born in particular castes inadvertently have to "belong" to those respective castes and continue with the same occupations across generations. However, whatever little scope of upward social mobility is possible within the caste system derives from Sanskritization and intermarriage. Outcome of such caste-based mobility could either be positive or negative. For example, provision of positive discrimination for lower castes enshrined in the Constitution of India is one such consequence that attempts at accommodating the less-privileged into the mainstream so that access to resources and opportunities are equitable. However, there are negative consequences as well e.g. potential of social mobility across caste system is the defining premise within which political appropriation of Hinduism has happened in India. In other words, it is by turning the prospect of upward caste mobility into vote bank politics that the political parties in

India could disrobe Hinduism off the essence of orthopraxy and customize the philosophy into an orthodox, exploitative, Brahmanical, patriarchal, parochial model.

In this context, Jaffrelot (2003) documents the manner in which Mandal Commission paved the way for a certain shift in power in the political sphere in India from upper to lower castes. Interestingly, Jaffrelot begins the text quoting Ambedkar, “We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. On the 26th of January, 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest moment, or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up”.

Implicit in the intention is Jaffrelot’s observation that religion in general and Hinduism in specific in India cannot be explained and understood without referring to its practices that are only manifested through the caste system. From Hindu folklores to Hindu politics, all are informed by the caste system of social mobility and immobility and consequent socio-political exploitations. Within this context, Hinduism in practice calls for social democracy that Hindu politics is dismissive of.

Hindutva politics in India with its Brahmanical caste order is leading to Saffronization of the land creating a socio-political environment that systematically others, exploits and victimizes the minorities including the non-Brahmins and Muslims. Cultural homogenization of Hindutva politics facilitates the process of Saffronization of even the civil society including the education system that Ilaiah (1996) has deeply engaged with. Kancha Ilaiah (1996) identifies this homogenizing trend in India that negates all non-Brahmanical hyper-Hindu sentiments and spaces. Ilaiah was inspired by Bertrand Russell (1957) and Paul Edwards’s work titled *Why I am not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* where Russell and Edwards connects Christianity with the larger issues of life and death, sexual ethics and morality and questions all that involved. In similar fashion, Ilaiah introduces the concept of ‘Dalitbahujan’ to refer to “people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority’ (Ilaiah 1995, ix)

Here, he brings into light not just the Brahmanical caste system that survives through exploitations of the lower castes, but also questions, at an existential level, the insistence of the Hindu (read Brahmanical) caste system to abhor the Muslims and the Christians. His entire narrative is based on the experience of the ‘other’ where he himself is the quintessential other that the upper castes look down upon. While locating the presence of Dalitbahujan in contemporary Hinduism in India, Ilaiah laments that there is none. “Dalitbahujan life figured nowhere in the curriculum. We had been excluded from history. In fact, it appeared as if our history was no history at all” (Ilaiah 1995, 54). Referring to his upper caste teachers in college, he observes that, “they continued to think of Hindu culture as a monolith. Even when they critiqued it, they perceived it only as class culture without realizing that the opposite of Hindu culture is actually Dalitbahujan culture” (Ilaiah 1995, 58).

One of the most popular components of this Brahmanical caste system in recent times is the celebration of vegetarianism and stigma around beef eating. While many Brahmins still eat beef and other meat e.g. Brahmins from Bengal and the North-Eastern part of India, the popular imagination of a good Hindu, as propagated by Hindutva ideology rests on the quintessential veg-

etarian who only eats Satvik food. Consequently, this practice of the Brahmanical caste system heavily informs the civil society insofar as cafes, restaurants and eateries increasingly refuse to sell meat during Ram Navami, even if those nine days arrive during Ramzan, to offer an example. Some of these illustrations are also mentioned in Ilaiah's work although one cannot dismiss the inner contradictions of the term Dalitbahujan or how the Sudras in rural India exploit the Dalits, discourses that do not find enough considerations in Ilaiah's work. The rise of the Other Backward Castes (OBC) and their support towards the BJP and the party's cult leaders remains another contested discourse in this regard.

However, Ilaiah's analyses captured through participant observation still remains crucial to the understanding of the transformation of the public sphere into vegetarian food hamlets that although began in the 1980s, has gathered momentum during the current regime since 2014. That way, Ilaiah's observation throws light on how cultural appropriation by Brahmanization of the land has been happening in India: "I have not seen a Kurumaa hotel or a Goudaa hotel that serves the food that suits our tastes. It seemed as though Brahmin and Kshatriya tastes were the universal tastes. All these hotels and shops—even public places like schools and colleges—hung pictures and calendars of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses—Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswara, Lakshmi, Saraswathi, Parvathi, and so on. Not only in the temples where a Brahmin occupies the supreme position of priest and where the murthies of brahminical Gods and Goddesses exist, but also in the institutions of civil society such as schools and offices. As our people moved into urban centres we were forced to feel that there was no place for our culture in public places. Our own people began to feel that if they spoke of Pochamma they would be ridiculed and humiliated." (Ilaiah 1995, 57).

Several of the observations made in the mid-1990s evolved into extreme forms since the BJP came to power in 2014. As a result, a commonplace understanding that Hindi is the official language in India, global projection of India as an essentially Hindu and vegetarian state, popularity of love-jihad, mob-lynching of (alleged) beef consumers and state-insistence on teaching children 'Hari Om' instead of 'good morning' in schools are mere illustrations of the process of Hinduization of civil society in India. What India is witnessing today is the rise of strong Islamophobic sentiments coupled with Saffronization of the civil society. Since radicalized Hindu politics or Hindutva is based on the understanding that upper caste Brahmanical ways of living is the defining premise of Hinduism, drive towards cultural homogenization by propagation of Hindutva politics is rampant in the country at the moment; beef ban, Dalit massacres and mob-lynching of Muslims in India offer some instances of religious extremism built around Hindutva politics in India. That way, Hindutva politics is a drastic shift from the so-called multiple little traditions that Indian society is composed of. Such politics acknowledges the existence of variations from the monolithic worldview it prescribes, but at the same time, it urges for elimination (and not unification, that otherwise is a fundamental characteristic of Hinduism epitomized in the practice of Sanskritization) of that 'other'. In that sense, Hindutva politics uses non-Brahmins and non-Hindus as vote banks and refuses to acknowledge their agency.

This particularly holds true for India in the current regime. Hindutva as the radical-right philosophy could be popularized prosper in a multi-lingual and multi-religious, if not mutli-ethnic country like India essentially through propaganda, and that is exactly what the BJP has been engaging with, since the General Elections 2014 in India till date. Political parties can popularize their agenda through propaganda that can best be communicated to the voters through media, especially digital media. As Chomsky (1991) discusses in *Media Control*, media propaganda thrives through a certain clandestine relationship between the political and the media elites. In India,

majority of the mediated buzzwords disseminated by the leading newspapers (e.g. The Times of India, Jainik Jagran, Hindustan Dainik and Hindustan Times) before and during the general elections since the arrival of the BJP (2014, 2019) till date were about Hindu religious overtones e.g. “NaMo”, “Hindutva”, “Jai Shree Ram”, “Har Har Modi”, to name a few (Basu 2016). In a similar fashion, Hindutva politics, based on Brahmanical worldview of cultural homogenization is striving for a Hinduized India bereft of any socio-cultural diversity and tolerance for secular principles as enshrined in the constitution. The imagination of a Hindu India contradicts the principle of secularism that was one of the central themes of nation building in the 1950s. Also, the translation of orthopraxy into the ritualistic contour of orthodoxy remains significant. Some of the illustrations of such reconfigurations are offered by Arvind Rajagopal (2001) and Ram Punyani (2009) while investigating the internal contradictions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharat telecasted every Sunday in the Doordarshan through the early 1990s in India.

Notwithstanding the evolution of the caste Hindu sentiments under the current regime in India, the distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva are conflicted and informed by multiple challenges. While Hinduism is based on plurality of interpretation, Hindutva as a politically appropriated agenda of the right-wing politics in India chooses to focus on ritualistic behaviour manifested through the caste system and rationalizes the Brahmanical hegemony. Within the present context of the BJP-led government, it goes onto establishing a culturally homogenous and monolithic socio-political climate through the cultivation of anti-minority sentiments among the people.

Located in the larger politics of right-wing regimes across the world, India’s situation resembles several other states dominated by right-wing politics including Turkey. While Turkey is undergoing a process of Islamization of education, in India what we witness today is Hinduization of education and civil society. In Turkey, Erdogan-led AKP is facing massive backlash from the people who vehemently oppose political appropriation of civil society in the form of Islamization of education. Similarly, India is also witnessing criticism and resistance from the left liberals who urge for separation between state and civil society where the state must uphold the principle of secularism and tolerance as the hallmark of democracy. However, present socio-political scenario in India shows quite a different picture where hyper-nationalism and “hatriotism” are playing supreme – in the name of preservation of Hindu culture. In addition, electronic and digital media in India are exacerbating this process of Saffronization.

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Notes

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³<https://hindutvawatch.org/why-hindu-nationalists-want-to-erase-mughal-history-the-swaddle/>

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