
Which Of Us Are Hindus?

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Renewed and aggressive demands for a recognition of what are called ‘Hindu’ rights and the ‘Hindu’ basis of Indian nationhood give rise to the question that provides the title of this essay. How is the category of the ‘Hindu’ constructed by the votaries of Hindu nationhood, who gets included among the elect and who excluded, what is meant when the so-called leaders of the Hindus speak about ‘Hindu’ interests? I wish to examine these questions here with reference to the writings and speeches of Hindu propagandists over the last hundred years or so.

II

‘Naturalness’, it might be said, is the mark of the narrative of community: naturalness of boundaries, of linguistic and/or religious practices, social structure, customs and, of course, the unity that flows from these. The natural unity of ‘Hindus’, of the ‘Hindu community’ (‘race’, ‘people’, ‘nation’ are other terms that have sometimes been used), of ‘Hindu tradition’, has been assumed and stressed by varieties of Hindu spokespersons in, varieties of ways from the later nineteenth century to today. India (Hindustan, Bharatvarsha, Aryavarta, Jambudwipa) has the most natural boundaries in the world, it has been said. ‘There is no part of the world better marked out by Nature as a region by itself than India, exclusive of Burma.’

Further, the ‘Hindus’ are the obvious, the original, the natural inhabitants of this land, as the very names ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hindustan’ testify. Given that there has never been any dispute over the proposition that the English, the French and the Germans constitute the nation in England, France and Germany, it is astonishing, these spokespersons have argued, that there should be any confusion about the identity of the nation in Hindustan. ‘Hindu society living in this country since time immemorial is the national [and ‘natural’] society here . . . The same Hindu people have built the life-values, ideals and culture of this country and, therefore, their nationhood is self-evident.’ Or again: ‘Undoubtedly . . . we—Hindus—have been in undisputed and undisturbed possession of this land for over eight or even ten thousand years before the land was invaded by any foreign race.’

In this way, we are told, there came into being what is assuredly the most ‘natural’ nation in the world. ‘Living in this country since pre-historic times . . . the Hindu Race [is] united together by common traditions, by memories of Common glory and disaster, by similar historical, political, social, religious and other experiences.’ ‘Historically, politically, ethnologically and culturally Hindusthan is one, whole and indivisible and so she shall remain.’ ‘If the Hindus do not possess a common history, then none in the world does’: indeed, as the same writer goes on to say, the Hindus are ‘about the only people’ who are blessed with those ‘ideal conditions . . . under which a nation can attain perfect solidarity and cohesion.’

It is of the essence of such narratives of community that they assert the superiority of their own particular community/nation. The ‘Hindus’ are declared to be the most ancient and civilized nation in the world, unparalleled in their philosophical and spiritual achievements, accommodating, tolerant, united, luxuriant, even—in a fundamental sense—unconquerable. ‘Great as the glories of the English world are, what on the whole, has it to show to match the glories of the Hindu world.’ ‘The very first page of history records our existence as a progressive and highly civilized nation . . .’

Hindu discourse has it that a spirit of nationalist unity has guided the history of ‘the Hindus’ from the beginnings of historical time. The goal of uniting all Hindus inspired the kings of ancient India, who were honoured with the titles of ‘Chakravartin’ (unifier of all Hindus, according to this dictionary) and ‘Vikramaditya’ (destroyer of all foreigners, in the same reading) if they were successful in their endeavours. It has been argued with greater conviction that the Hindus waged an incessant battle
for liberation from alien rule for a thousand years before 1947, that is, since Muslim rulers first established their sway over a large part of northern India. In particular, a whole hagiography has developed around the heroic deeds of the Rajputs, the Marathas and the Sikhs—the valiant struggles and martyrdom of Maharana Pratap, Shivaji, Guru Gobind Singh and others. The Hindu struggle continued throughout the colonial period. This is exemplified, according to Hindu spokespersons, by the great Uprising of 1857, and the careers of Rammohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Lokmanya Tilak, Swami Vivekananda and logics more. Here is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) supremo, M.S. Golwalkar, on 1857, which demonstrates once again, in his view, how the ‘living vision of Hindu Rashtra’ inspired ‘all our valiant freedom fighters in the past and in modern times’:

The great leaders of that revolution, at the very first stroke, captured Delhi and . . . reinstated [Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal King, nominally Emperor of India until he was dethroned and exiled by the British in 1858 . . . as the free Emperor and . . . the leader of the War of Independence . . . But this step made the Hindu masses suspect that the atrocious Moghul [Mughal] rule, which was smashed by the heroic efforts and sacrifices of Guru Govind Singh, Chhatrasal, Shivaji and such others would once again be revived and foisted on them . . . Historians say that this was one of the decisive factors which ultimately led to the collapse of that revolution [of 1857].

Indeed what we sometimes have is the remarkable proposition that all social and political activities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which Hindus took part were geared to the task of re-establishing the Hindu nation in its superior and glorious splendour. Any political leader and reformer of the period who happens to have been a Hindu may be appropriated to the history of Hindu nationalism, including at times (albeit with some bitterness) Mahatma Gandhi and even Jawaharlal Nehru.

. . . the whole race of [revolutionary terrorist] martyrs in Bengal, in the Punjab, U.P., Maharashtra, Madras,
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thy, although not a single historical work or historian’s name is cited—
‘that this [withdrawal of ‘Hindu’ support] was one of the decisive factors
which ultimately led to the collapse of that revolution.’

In the end, the claim made is this, that every Hindu reformer, thinker,
political activist who fought for local rights, self-respect or increased
opportunity, anywhere at any time, was part of one and the same strug-
gle—the struggle for a Hindu Rashtra. It is striking, for instance, that the
Sikhs are included unproblematically in this category of fighters for
Hindu freedom, in spite of the long and successful Sikh struggle from the
last decades of the nineteenth century onwards, that is, through the very
period when this Hindu discourse was acquiring its modern, militant form,
to establish a Sikh identity distinct from that of ‘Hindus’.

If Hindus, or people who were nominally ‘Hindu’, or those who should
have acknowledged their ‘Hinduhood’, are known to have risen in protest
against someone or something, that is enough to establish the ‘Hindu’
purpose of their crusade. It is pertinent, therefore, to ask when goals like
that of a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ first came to be articulated, and indeed when
the word ‘Hindu’ came to acquire its present signification.

III

It would appear, from the historical evidence I have so far seen, that the
notion of a Hindu Rashtra—India as a Hindu nation, the land of the Hindus
alone—was first advanced in the 1920s, and many of the first steps
aiming towards its realization were taken only at this time. This is well
illustrated in the argument about the need for Hindu sangathan (organiza-
tion) put forward by the Arya Samaj leader, social reformer and militant
nationalist, Swami Shraddhanand, in a pamphlet, Hindu Sangathan:
Saviour of the Dying Race, published in 1924.

Shraddhanand advocated as a first step towards the organization of the
Hindus, the building of one ‘Hindu Rashtra Mandir’ in every city and
important town of India. Each mandir was to have a compound capable
of holding an audience of 25,000, and a large hall for recitations from the
holy texts and epics. Unlike most Hindu temples, associated with a
particular tradition or sect and dominated by their own individual deities,
this ‘Catholic Hindu Mandir’ was to be devoted to the worship of ‘the
three mother-spirits’—Gau-mata (or Mother cow), Saraswati-mata

(Mother Saraswati, the goddess of learning) and Bhumi-mata (Mother
earth). ‘Let some living cows be there to represent plenty.’ Shraddhanand
wrote,

let ‘Savitri’ (सावित्री माता) be inscribed over the gate of the hall
to remind every Hindu of his duty to expel all ignorance and
let a life-like map of Mother-Bharat be constructed in a
prominent place, giving all its characteristics [sic] in vivid
colours so that every child of the Matri-Bhumi may daily bow
before the Mother and renew his pledge to restore her to the
ancient pinnacle of glory from which she has fallen!12

Shraddhanand wrote in the context of increasing strife between Hindus
and Muslims in urban centres throughout northern India, and growing
demands for shuddhi and sangathan on the Hindu side, with matching
calls for tabligh (propagation of the faith) and tanzim (organization)
on the Muslim side. For many Hindu publicists and politicians, the Khilafat
movement and the Mappila revolt had raised the spectre of a thoroughly
united, well-organized and militant Muslim populace all set to wipe out
the Hindus and their culture. The relative decline in Hindu numbers that
the decennial censuses had apparently established, and the question of the
place of ‘untouchables’ and tribal groups that were only loosely attached
to Hindu society, now acquired a new importance.

Shraddhanand’s pamphlet made these concerns amply clear.13 Edu-
cated Hindus were reluctant to mix with each other, he noted: the reason
was that ‘they have no common meeting place.’ Even their bigger temples
could barely seat a hundred or two hundred people together. By contrast,
in Delhi alone, ‘besides the Juma and Fatehpuri mosques which can
accommodate big audiences consisting of 25 to 30 thousands of
Muhammadans, there are several old mosques which can serve as meeting
places for thousands,’ (p.139). It was to rectify this imbalance that
Shraddhanand suggested the building of ‘Hindu Rashtra Mandirs’,
capable of holding 25,000 people, in every town and city.

A call for organization, discipline and training accompanied the call
for building these temples. The large compounds were also to provide
space for akharas where wrestling and gymnastics would be practised,
and be the venue for dramatic performances. All these activities, and the
temples themselves, were to be run by the local Hindu Sabhas (p. 140).
‘Protection of the cow is a powerful factor not only in giving the Hindu community a common plane for joint action,’ Shraddhanand wrote,

but in contributing to the physical development and strength of its several members. But if the drain upon the depressed classes [‘untouchables’ and other low castes] continues and they go on leaving their ancestral religion on account of the social tyranny of their co-religionists, and the onrush of Hindu widows towards prostitution and Muhammadanism, on account of the brutal treatment of [by] their relations, is not stopped by allowing them to remarry in their own community, the number of beef-eaters will increase ... (p. 138)

Thus, the question of reform in the position of untouchables and widows, of conversion to other religions, of the physical development and strength of the ‘Hindus’, in a word, of organizing and unifying the ‘Hindu Nation’, acquired a new urgency in the 1920s. The context for this was provided by the emergence of countrywide mass political organizations and agitations; what was perceived as a quite new and threatening level of Muslim organization, preparedness and militancy; a powerful Sikh movement for reform of their gurdwaras which the community as a whole should henceforth control; and much else that historians of nationalism and popular protest have written about. The position in the nineteenth century had been nothing like this.

For a start, many of the nineteenth century thinkers and publicists now claimed as the (modern) founders of the movement for Hindu nationhood functioned before the idea had gained the fixity of a popular prejudice that nations and nation-states are the only appropriate—the ‘natural’—form of the political existence of peoples. Not only is this obviously true in the case of people like Rammohan Roy who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is true in important ways for writers and thinkers of the latter half of the nineteenth century, who were quite evidently struggling with the question of how the ‘we’ of a possible Indian nationhood might be constituted.14 It was only towards the end of the century that some sort of consensus developed that this ‘we’ referred to all the people who lived in the territory called India, a consensus that would itself come to be challenged in time by the proponents of the Hindu and the Muslim Rashtra.

Into the twentieth century, there was considerable experimentation as regards names for the ‘we’ of the Indian nation. Muhammad Iqbal wrote in his famous “Song of India” (Tarana-i-Hind): ‘Hindi hain hum, vaatan hai, Hindostan hamara’ (We [the people] are Hindi, our homeland is Hindustan.) And if Iqbal appears to be an exception as a poet, we have more prosaic examples of similar terminological usages. Take for example V.D. Savarkar, an acknowledged founder of the modern Hindu political movement, who declared in his Hindutva (written in prison during the years of the First World War and published for the first time in 1923) that ‘Bharatiya’ or ‘Hindi’ is synonymous with ‘an Indian’, that either term may be used for ‘a countryman and a fellow citizen.”15

The term ‘Hindu’ was also used at times, throughout this period, to designate the collectivity of people of India—Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, et al. In a famous lecture delivered in Ballia (Uttar Pradesh) probably in 1884, Bharatendu Harishchandra declared: ‘Whoever lives in Hindustan, whatever his colour or caste, is a Hindu,’ going on to elaborate his meaning with the proposition that ‘Bengalis, Marathas, Panjabis, Madrasis [sic], Vaidiks, Jains, Brahmos, Musalmans’ were all ‘Hindus’ involved in a common historical project. It has been argued that Bharatendu’s use of the term in this way, at this time, was tendentious, an interested Hindu move to erode the separate cultural identities of other groups in India by an expansionist usage of the name ‘Hindu’. There is, perhaps, some force in this argument: the term has certainly been used in precisely this way by Hindu propagandists in more recent times. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was still considerable uncertainty about the appropriate designations for emerging solidarities and new goals and movements, and the meanings and usages of many such terms remained fairly fluid. It is interesting to note, for example, that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) used the term ‘Hindu’ in exactly the same way as Bharatendu, to mean ‘the inhabitants of Hindustan,’16 in a lecture given in Lahore during the same year, 1884.

A couple of decades later, this usage had become very much less common, or even permissible. ‘It is only in America,’ wrote Bhai Parmanand of his experience there in the early 1900s, ‘that the word “Hindu” is correctly used to denote the inhabitants of Hindustan, be they Hindu, Sikh or Musalman by religion.’ Hence, he observed, the question that an American acquaintance had once asked him: ‘Are all Hindus Musalmans?’17

‘Hindu’ as the designation for people belonging to a particular
religious tradition, or set of traditions, was of course already the most common meaning of the term in India even in the later nineteenth century. Thus, in that selfsame Ballia lecture where he included among the Hindus all the inhabitants of Hindustan, Bharatendu Harischandra also had passages addressed to different sections of the collective Indian community-sections called ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ (or, more specifically, ‘Hindu Brothers’ and ‘Muslim Brothers’). But even where people spoke of ‘Hindus’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Sikhs’, etc., by religion, it was not always apparent who was included, and who excluded, from the category.

The single biggest question in this respect stood over the category of people now coming to be designated collectively as the ‘untouchables’—once considered outcaste, outside the four-varna classification and, hence, pancham (the fifth ‘estate’). I shall have more to say about this and other lower-caste and class groups later in this paper. Suffice it here to say that in day-to-day reckoning the ‘untouchables’ were often not thought of as Hindus by upper-caste Hindus themselves. Officials in Chhattisgarh (eastern Madhya Pradesh) observed early in this century, for example, that whereas ‘over most of India’ the term ‘Hindu’ was contrasted to ‘Muslim’, ‘in Chhattisgarh to call a man a Hindu conveys primarily that he is not a Chamar, or Chamara according to the contemptuous abbreviation [sic] in common use.’18 ‘Over most of India’ is a misleading phrase too, based almost certainly on nothing but a general impression. Does this exclude all of the north-eastern states of present-day India, and the bulk of the South Indian peninsula: in other words, a very large part of the land and the people of India? For in Tamil Nadu, and I would guess in other parts of South India and indeed in many parts of North India, the term Hindu is used to this day specifically to differentiate upper-caste Hindus (the ‘Hindus’) from ‘untouchables’ or Harijans as they are now more often called.

In any event, at the turn of the twentieth century, there was still much uncertainty about the collectivity called the ‘Hindu community’, and many different meanings still attached to the term ‘Hindu’. One question, in particular, had by then been posed sharply. That was whether Buddhists and Jains, Sikhs, members of different bhakti sects such as the Kabirpanthis and Vallabhacharyas, and also of course the ‘untouchable’ and ‘tribal’ groups and castes who literally lived on the physical/geographical fringes of settled Hindu society, whether all of these groups were to be included among the Hindus or not.

It was precisely this question of who was a Hindu that V.D. Savarkar set out to resolve, once and for all as he would have it, in his book, Hinduva.19 The problem came into being, he declared, because of the loose and eclectic usage of the terms Hindu, Hinduism and Hinduuta, especially in the recent past. The question was important because new challenges had arisen, old categories were being redefined and ‘unified’ in new ways, and the religious/cultural tradition(s) now designated as ‘Hindu’ (or ‘Hinduism’) were also in process of re-articulation.

Savarkar begins his book with a long discourse on the importance of a name:

As the association of the [name] with the thing it signifies grows stronger and lasts long, so does the channel which connects the two states of consciousness tend to allow an easy flow of thoughts from one to the other, till at last it seems almost impossible to separate them. And when in addition to this a number of secondary thoughts or feelings that are generally roused by the thing get mystically entwined with the word that signifies it, the name seems to matter as much as the thing itself (pp. 1–2).

The idea of a mystical unity of ‘word’ and ‘thing’, derived perhaps from Sufi tradition and certain Hindu bhakti practices, now has a political application. Savarkar considers at some length the relative merits of different names that have been applied to India: Aryavarta, Brahmavarta, Dakshinapath, Bharatvarsha, Hindustan. The name he opts for is ‘Hindustan’ which is, in his reading, the original, the authentic and most sacred name of this sacred land.

The commonly accepted argument, then as now, was that the terms ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hindustan’ were derived at some time in the distant past from ‘Sindhu’, the name given by ‘immigrant’ Aryans to the river Indus and, later, to all rivers in the subcontinent and also to the seas. Savarkar, while accepting this view, contests the originality of the Aryan word ‘Sindhu’. ‘It is quite probable,’ he writes, ‘that the great Indus was known as Hindu to the original inhabitants of our land and owing to the vocal peculiarity of the Aryans [the easy conversion of the sound h to s, and vice versa] it got changed into Sindhu.’ ‘Thus,’ he goes on,
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Hindu would be the name that this land and the people that inhabited it bore from time so immemorial that even the Vedic name Sindhu is but a later and secondary form of it. If the epithet Sindhu dates its antiquity in the glimmering twilight [sic] of history then the word Hindu dates its antiquity from a period so remoter [sic] than the first that even mythology fails to penetrate—to trace it to its source (p. 10).

The earliest is frequently adjudged in nationalist discourse to be the best. Or if the 'best' requires a leaven of the 'modern', of reform, of adjustment to capitalist and industrial times, the earliest is nevertheless the 'purest', the roots of our glory, an infinite source of strength. As time passed and the Hindus consolidated their sway all over this land, new names arose, notes Savarkar. But they never wiped out that first, 'cradle name of our nation in India.' 'Down to this day the whole world knows us as “Hindus” and our land as “Hindusthan” as if in fulfilment of the wishes of our Vedic fathers who were the first to make that choice.'

'Hindu', 'Hindustan', 'Hindutva', then, are not mere words but a civilization and a history, which can and should be precisely defined. 'Hindutva,' wrote Savarkar, 'is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be . . . but a history in full. Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva. Unless it is made clear what is meant by the latter the first remains unintelligible and vague.'

'A Hindu,' he says further, 'means a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha, from the Indus to the seas as his Fatherland as well as his Holyland, that is the cradle land of his religion':

आसिकिन्यियु परद्वा वयम विदेश मिति ।
पियारुः प्राच्यवैयस स वे हिन्दूस्वति सूक्तः।

'Hinduism' means the "ism" of the Hindu; and as the word Hindu has been derived from the word Sindhu, . . . meaning primarily all the people who reside in the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu [the Indus to the seas], Hinduism must necessarily mean the religion or the religions that are peculiar and native to this land and these people,' (p. 104). The term 'Hinduism' has been wrongly used, for Vaidik or Sanatan Dharma alone (p. 109). 'Properly speaking [it] should be applied to all the religious beliefs that the different communities of the Hindu people hold,' (p. 105).

The importance of Savarkar's exercise of finding a precise definition of Hindu, Hindutva and Hinduism is well illustrated by the reactions to his book. The publisher's preface to the 4th edition of the book, published in 1949, observed that 'the definition [of Hindutva] acted as does some scientific discovery of a new truth in re-shaping and re-co-ordinating all current Thought and Action . . . At its touch [sic] arose an organic order where a chaos of castes and creeds ruled. The definition provided a broad basis on which a consolidated and mighty Hindu Nation could take a secure stand,' (p. vi). Swami Shraddhanand had responded in similar terms on the first publication of the book: 'It must have been one of those Vaidik dawns indeed which inspired our Seers with new truths, that revealed to the author of "Hindutva" this Mantra . . . this definition of Hindutva!!' (p. vi).

One may discount the hyperbole in these reactions, but still recognize that for the champions of Hindutva and Hinduism an adequate, acceptable, workable definition of the terms was still being sought in the 1920s. Hence, Savarkar's statement appeared in the form of a 'scientific discovery'. It was like a 'revelation'. It brought order out of growing chaos, and gave the advocates of Hindu organization and Hindu politics a clearer foundation from which to work.

IV.

All identities are built upon a series of identifications and exclusions, in other words by differentiating between 'Us' and 'Them', the Self and the Other. Savarkar had established, to his own satisfaction and that of many other advocates of Hindu assertion, who was and who was not to be included in the Hindu community. His comments on the Sikhs sum up his position. 'Along with us [they] bewail the fall of Prithviraj, share the fate of a conquered people and suffer together as Hindus.' There is much to be questioned in this tendentious historical reconstruction, in its assertion of a subcontinent-wide sympathy for Prithviraj Chauhan and its collapsing of the suffering of the Sikhs and of all other 'Hindus' into one, but we will let that pass.

The author of Hindutva finds further evidence of the Sikhs' Hinduness in what he calls their 'adoration' of Sanskrit as a sacred language and the
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language of their ancestors. Lastly,

the land spread from the river, Sindhu, to the seas is not only the fatherland but also the holyland [sic] of the Sikhs. Guru Nanak and Guru Govind, Shri Banda [sic] and Ramsing were born and bred in Hindusthan; the lakes of Hindusthan are the lakes of nectar (Amritsar) and of freedom (Muktasar) . . .

Really if any community in India is Hindu beyond cavil or criticism it is our Sikh brotherhood in the Punjab, being almost the autochthonous dwellers of the Saptasingh land and the direct descendants of the Sindhu or Hindu people . . . (pp. 123–24).

Savarkar goes on to clarify that the Sikhs are not Hindus in a religious sense, and that the Sikh protest against their classification as Hindus arose only because the Sanatanists had appropriated the word Hindu for themselves.

Sikhs are Hindus in the sense of our definition of Hinduism and not in any religious sense whatever. Religiously they are Sikhs as Jains are Jains, Lingayats are Lingayats, Vaishnavas are Vaishnavas; but all of us racially and nationally and culturally are a polity and a people . . . Bharatiya indicates an Indian and expresses a larger generalization but cannot express [the] racial unity of us Hindus. We are Sikhs, and Hindus and Bharatiyas. We are all three put together and none exclusively (p. 125).

This sense of ‘Bharatiya’ or ‘Hindi’ (‘Indian’) enabled Savarkar to accommodate his polity those Indians who were not, in his view, Hindu. The vast majority of them, he acknowledged, were local converts and had ‘Hindu blood’ flowing in their veins. But even if India, Bharatavarsha, Hindustan, was in this sense their ‘Fatherland’, they no longer recognized it as their ‘Holyland’. They did not, after all, look upon Sanskrit as a sacred language. He said:

An American may become a citizen of India. He would certainly be entitled, if bona fide, to be treated as . . .

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Bharatiya or Hindi, a countryman and a fellow citizen of ours. But as long as in addition to our country, he has not adopted our culture and our history, inherited our blood and . . . come to look upon our land not only as the land of his love but even of his worship, he cannot get himself incorporated into the Hindu fold (p. 84).

For Savarkar and other Hindu nationalists of the 1920s and Thirties, then, the Muslims and Christians who lived in India, and had lived in most cases as long as the ‘Hindus,’ had a place in the country, albeit probably a subordinate one—as ‘citizens’ (‘Bharatiya’ or ‘Indian’). The emerging and contending visions of the future nation-state had still no room for the notion of separate territories for any of these communities. Later Hindu propagandists have been rather more inflexible in their formulation of the meaning of Hindu nationhood, precisely because the notion of a separate territory gained ground first as an idea, and then as political reality—in Pakistan. For many of these propagandists, the Indian nation has come to be coterminous with the Hindu community. Explicitly or implicitly, Pakistan (and, since 1971, Bangladesh) has become the place where Indian Muslims belong.22

The inclusions and exclusions that go to make up community and nation in the Hindu discourse are, in fact, far more restrictive than Savarkar or any other Hindu writer openly suggests. The ‘Hindu’ is far from being a transparent category, even today. Indeed, it can be shown that only a section of Hindus appear as truly ‘Hindu’ and truly ‘national’ in this selfsame Hindu discourse. M.S. Golwalkar’s speeches and writings, collected in his Bunch of Thoughts published in the mid-1960s23 provides a useful starting point for a discussion of this proposition.

The ‘Hindus’ appear in Golwalkar’s account as the nation in India. ‘The Hindu . . . has ever been devoted to Bharat and ready to strive for its progress and uphold its honour. The national life values of Bharat are indeed derived from the life of Hindus. As such he [sic] is the “national” here . . . ‘(p. 218). Definitionally, therefore, the Hindus cannot be ‘anti-national’. There are, however, several groups in the country who are anti-national, as Bunch of Thoughts makes abundantly clear. One section of this book is entitled, “The Nation and its Problems”. Much the longest chapter in this section is headed “Internal Threats”. The three sub-headings for the chapter are 1. “The Muslims” 2. “The Christians” 3. “The Communists”.

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Golwalkar’s attack upon the Chinese (‘intoxicated monkeys’) is striking, as is the touching faith in the fore-knowledge of Europeans (Napoleon’s warning). The RSS thinker goes on to make the comparison in so many words: ‘The Englishmen [who ruled India] were a civilized people who generally followed the rule of law. The Chinese are a different proposition,’ (p. 382).

It will be evident, however, that the Hindu attack against Chinese/Communists has other ‘nationalist’ aspects to it. Here and elsewhere, the charge is made that Communism is a foreign ideology and therefore has no place in India.

As a ‘foreign ideology’, Communism and, by extension, any communist in India become ‘anti-national’ almost by definition. But two other grounds for the rejection of Communist ideology by the Hindu ideologues also need to be noted. One is that it is ‘against religion’—further evidence of its demoniacal character and its alienness to Indian (Hindu? spiritual?) traditions. The other is that it is ‘anti-democratic’. Hindu propagandists concede sometimes that the Bolshevik otherthrow of Tsarism in Russia was a blow against oppression and inequality. But the end of landlordism, largely accomplished in Russia and China, and threatened in India in the 1950s, is another matter. This strikes at the heart of bourgeois freedoms: that is, the right to property. By extension—and demonstrably in the practices of Communist regimes in many parts of the world—Communism threatens other bourgeois freedoms too: the freedom of speech, a free press, the right to association, the freedom of religion which we have already mentioned, and so on. But the right to property is the most crucial one of all. To deny that is to deny all social distinctions and hence the very basis of good nationhood; for, as Golwalkar put it in 1939, a good country or nation should have ‘all four classes of society as conceived by Hindu Religion’.

To return to Golwalkar’s more general account of the ‘national’ interest, the ‘Hindu’ (i.e., the truly ‘national’) appears in this account as ‘non-Muslim’, ‘non-Christian’ and ‘non-Communist’. But there are other exclusions, too, that go into the construction of the category. The ‘Hindu’ appears also as male, upper-caste and, though I do not wish to press this point too far, possibly North Indian as well. Let us consider the question of caste (and class) first, which is sharply focused in the debate on the place of ‘untouchables’ in Hindu society.

Census redefinition, and the exceptional importance attached to
numbers in the political and administrative calculations of the Raj, contributed directly to the ‘Hindu’ fear of losing the ‘untouchables’, as I have already noted. Historians have commented on the impact of the Gait Circular which directed that separate tables be drawn up in the 1911 census for groups—like the ‘untouchables’ and many tribal communities—who were not unambiguously Hindus. The circular ‘proved a good tonic for the apathy of orthodox Kashi,’ wrote Lala Lajpat Rai.

One fine morning the learned pandits . . . rose to learn that their orthodoxy stood the chance of losing the allegiance of 6 crores of human beings who, the Government and its advisers were told, were not Hindus, in so far as other Hindus would not acknowledge them as such, and would not even touch them . . . The possibility of losing the untouchables has shaken the intellectual section of the Hindu community to its very depths . . .

As the assertion of community identity gathered pace at many levels—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Nadar, Patidar, Namasudra, Bihari, Oriya, Telugu—and economic and political competition between (and among) these groups acquired new dimensions, militant Hindu leaders and organizations initiated a variety of moves to consolidate the ‘Hindu community’. Among these was the shuddhi campaign launched by the Arya Samaj in the later nineteenth century, which gained support in many other quarters as well by the early decades of the twentieth.

In the 1920s, Arya Samajists and some of their more orthodox allies ‘rediscovered’ the Devalasnrird, said to have been written in the century or so after the first Arab raids on Sind, which prescribed lengthy rules for readmission into Hinduism of Hindus who had been forcibly converted; and in the 1930s, the vrasyasrma rites (supposedly laid down in the Atharvaveda and the Brahmanas) for re-admittance of those who were earlier judged to have fallen out of ‘Aryan’ society. And shuddhi came to have a much broader significance than its original sense of ‘purification’ would automatically suggest, as it came to be applied not only to reclamation, that is, raising the status of the antyay (depressed) classes and making them full Hindus; but also to:

- reclamation, that is, raising the status of the antyay

(depressed) classes and making them full Hindus; but also to
- renconversion of those who had at some stage in the recent or distant past taken to a ‘foreign’ religion; and to
- conversion to Hinduism of people belonging to ‘foreign’ religions.

Many Hindu spokespersons, from Dayanand’s time until today, have spoken out strongly against ‘perverse’ Hindu religious notions and practices, the ‘silly’ ‘anti-national’ tradition of caste divisions, the restrictions on inter-dining and travel overseas, the ‘fantastic’ ideas of pollution and the consequent ban on reconversion which ensured that ‘millions of forcibly converted Hindus have remained Muslims even to this day.’ But the matter was not so easily settled, for Hinduism, Hindu beliefs and practices were heavily dependent on ‘silly’, ‘anti-national’ traditions such as caste. The point is well illustrated by some of the paradoxical positions adopted during the debate on untouchables in the 1920s.

A special session of the Hindu Mahasabha, held at Allahabad in February 1924, discussed a resolution which urged that ‘untouchables’ should be given access to schools, temples and public wells. The resolution went on to say, however, that it was ‘against the scriptures and the tradition’ to give the untouchables the ‘sacred thread’ (yagyopavita), to teach them the Vedas or to inter-dine with them: the Mahasabha hoped, therefore, that ‘in the interest of unity[sic]’ Hindu workers would give up these items of social reform. Owing to the strong opposition of Arya Samaji delegates present at the meeting, this clause had to be amended. But the compromise statement that resulted makes my point just as well. It read: ‘As the giving of “Yagyopavita” to untouchables, interdining with them and teaching them Veda was opposed to the Scriptures according to a very large body of Hindus, i.e. the Sanatanists, these activities should not be carried on in the name of the Mahasabha.’

The question of shuddhi also proved contentious. Despite deep divisions, the Mahasabha ultimately (and unanimously) adopted the pronouncement of seventy-five pandits of Benaras whose opinion it had sought. The pandits had declared: ‘Any non-Hindu was welcome to enter the fold of Hinduism, though he [sic] could not be taken into any caste’ A remarkable decision, given that caste position has been a central feature of the identity of any Hindu.
Hindus And Others

The great difficulty of defining what would be the appropriate ‘Hindu tradition and practice’ in relation to the untouchables and other ‘converts’ meant that many, non-Hindus especially, would continue to ask whether ‘untouchables’ and ‘tribals’ were, in fact, Hindus. Veer Bharat Talwar has argued recently that acceptance of varnasrama dharma (in effect, caste) and the supremacy of the Brahmin, the worship of the cow, and the burning of the dead, are three features of commonality in the beliefs and practices of all Hindus. On the question of veneration for the cow and the manner of disposal of the dead, Hindu propagandists would surely agree: and on that ground much of the tribal population living in and around the forests of India must be reckoned as being outside the Hindu fold even today, for many among them eat beef and bury their dead. A similar question mark must lie over sections of the remainder of the ‘depressed classes’ (or untouchables) who live in closer proximity to mainstream Hindu society.

‘The depressed classes are Hindus,’ Lajpat Rai asserted, ‘they worship Hindu gods, observe Hindu customs, and follow the Hindu law.’ But even he could not claim that all of them worshipped the cow. ‘A great many of them worship the cow and obey their Brahmin priests.’ Savarkar put the argument even more strongly in his analysis of the boundaries of Hindu dharma. Regarding the ‘Santals, Kolis, Bhis, Panchamas, Namashudras and all other such [depressed] tribes and classes,’ he wrote.

This Sindhusthan is as emphatically, the land of their forefathers as of those of the so-called Aryans; they inherit the Hindu blood and the Hindu culture; and even those of them who have not as yet come fully under the influence of any orthodox Hindu sect, do still worship deities and saints and follow a religion however primitive, are still purely attached to this land, which therefore to them is not only a Fatherland but a Holyland.

It is important to note the special pleading that goes into these statements. The ‘depressed classes’, untouchables, are indubitably Hindu: ‘they do... worship deities and saints,’ some of them even worship the cow—even if they are, on the whole, rather ‘primitive’. In the case of many tribal and untouchable communities, it is commonly argued that they are ‘fallen’ Hindus, Hindus who do not know (or have forgotten) that they are Hindus and need to be taught this truth. The question that remains is whether these ‘marginal’ Hindus are not, in the interests of ‘unity’ and the continued privileges of Brahmins and others among the elite of Hindu society, assigned an entirely subordinate, indeed marginal, place in Hindu society. The answer, it seems, to me, is in the affirmative.

In the nineteenth century reassertion of Hinduism, the argument had been made that the Aryans of Aryadesh were the ‘original’, and the most civilized, inhabitants of the world. In the Hindu propaganda of the time, this Aryadesh or Hindustan frequently appeared to be co-extensive with northern India. Even Dayanand Saraswati drew the southern boundary of Aryavarta at the Vindhyas: it was only in his last years that he seems to have developed an awareness that India south of the Vindhyas must also be drawn into the Arya movement.

Physical boundaries, however, were only one part of the problem. The physical boundaries of Aryavarta, Hindustan, could be drawn by the Sindhu (from ‘Sindhu to Sindhu’, the river to the seas) or more adequately at the North-West Frontier (from ‘Attock to Cuttack’, as Hindu propagandists had it). Beyond this lay mlecchasthan, the land of the mlecchas (‘unclean’). The physical bounds therefore connoted spiritual bounds as well, and spiritual bounds that could be found within the territory of India too—among the Muslims, Christians and others who were, by definition, ‘primitive’, ‘dirty’, ‘uncivilized’. It is at this point that the marginal position of the untouchables reappears.

This is strikingly illustrated in the writings of Swami Shraddhanand, who was a strong advocate of the abolition of untouchability and openly expressed his anger at the ambivalence of the Hindu Mahasabha on this question in the 1920s. Inter-dining ‘alone can solve the problem of untouchability and exclusiveness among the Hindus,’ Shraddhanand declared. Therefore ‘inter-dining among all the castes should be commenced at once.’ But care had to be exercised. The inter-dining was not to be ‘promiscuous eating out of the same cup and dish like Muhammadans.’ Instead, it would mean the ‘partaking of food in separate cups and dishes, cooked and served by decent Shudras.’ Decent’, that is, ‘clean’ Shudras—the relatively privileged among the cultivating and artisanal communities, who had aspired to and attained something of a higher status, economically, politically and culturally, within the local community. Even such equality—the equality of being allowed to cook for and serve the higher castes—could not be conceded to the lowest
classes, the menial labourers, the truly ‘unclean’—whether Shudra or ‘untouchable’.

Savarkar had asserted in the statement quoted above that the ‘depressed classes’ were even more emphatically Hindu than the so-called Aryans, although they practiced a rather ‘primitive’ religion. Later propagandists have been wary of any such statement which might admit that some of these castes and tribes have been living in India from before the coming of the so-called Aryans.

A special number of the RSS journal, Panchjanya, devoted to the ‘tribal’ peoples of India and published in March 1982, is significantly entitled ‘Veer Vanvasi ankh’. The use of the term ‘vanvasi’ (forest- or jungle-dwellers) in place of the designation ‘divasi’, which had come to be the most commonly used term among social scientists and political activists talking about tribal groups in India, is not an accident. ‘Divasi’ means ‘original inhabitants’, a status that the Hindu spokespersons of today are loathe to accord to the tribal population of India. ‘Vanvis’, on the other hand, points rather directly to a ‘primitive’ character—the character that is being imputed to these brave (veer) but backward, ‘uncivilized’ sections of society that have still to be fully reclaimed for Hinduism.

What we have in the Hindu discourse, then, is an urge to ‘Hindu’ unity and militancy, overdetermined by a concern to preserve ‘natural order’. The Hindu opposition to Communism, which we have mentioned, is in this account based on no small part on the threat that Communism poses to landlornism (zamindari) and class distinctions in general. ‘A good country . . . [or] Nation,’ as Golwalkar said, ‘. . . should have all four classes of society as conceived by Hindu Religion.’ The move I have made here from a Marxist sense of class to a Hindu notion of caste is perhaps legitimate, for in my view the two reinforce each other in the Hindu discourse. But the primary moment is probably that of the varna-vyavastha, with its underlying notions of a hierarchical order based on caste or birth, and differing duties, rights and privileges according to one’s place in that order.

Mlecchas, Golwalkar went on to say immediately after the statement just quoted, are ‘those who do not subscribe to the social laws dictated by the Hindu Religion and Culture.’ It needs to be stressed that the ‘mlecchas’ of this vision often include not only Muslims, Christians and Communists, but also the insufficiently ‘reclaimed’ untouchables and tribals, Kabirpanthis and Satnamis, on occasion ‘women’, ‘South Indians’, the people of the north-eastern states of India, and indeed any other group or sect that challenges the ‘social laws’ of the Hindus as defined by the upper castes and classes of Hindu society. ‘Hindu Religion and Culture,’ in Golwalkar’s statement as in most other so-called ‘Hindu’ pronouncements, stands for ‘Brahman- and Kshatra-dharma’ and for the dharma of other classes as defined by ‘Brahmin’ and ‘Kshatriya’ men. This is a point that may be further illustrated through a discussion of the masculist character of the Hindu discourse.

The figure of Woman plays a crucial part in Hindu discourse, as it does in nationalist discourse more generally in India and elsewhere. Swami Shraddhanand was hardly unique when he wrote of his wish that ‘Every child of the Matri-Bhumi [motherland] may daily bow before the Mother and renew his pledge to restore her to the ancient pinnacle of glory from which she has fallen!’ Every child that mattered was apparently male. The community was a community of men—sometimes, indeed, only Brahmans and Kshatriyas. ‘May spiritualized Brahmins take birth in our State, may bold champions of Truth and chastizers of enemies of Dharma, [i.e.] Kshatriyas, may milch cows and strong bulls, fleet horses and cultured ladies, together with youthful sin-conquering members of State be born in our midst.’

‘The Hindu People . . . is the Virat Purusha, the Almighty manifesting Himself.’ But the symbol of the community in its ‘modern’, ‘national’ form is female: Motherland, Mother Bharat. Golwalkar sums up the position for us:

As human life evolves, the concept of mother also takes a wider and more sublime form . . . [Man] sees the rivers which give him food and water. He calls them mother. Once he outgrows the use of his mother’s milk, he sees the cow which feeds him with her milk throughout his life. He calls it mother-cow. And then he reaches the state of understanding that it is the mother soil which nourishes him, protects him and takes him in her bosom even after he breathes his last. He becomes conscious that she is his great mother. Thus to look upon one’s land of birth as mother is a sign of a high state of human evolution.47
The decision to so look upon it was, however, always that of men: the Mother was inevitably born of a Father. Witness Savarkar’s advocacy of the name ‘Hindusthan’ in accordance with the wishes of ‘our Vedic fathers’.

Woman appears in the Hindu discourse as Mother and Nurturer, Preserver of Tradition, and Property. Her appearance as Mother Earth, Mother India, the Nation, represents not only a borrowing and an emulation of linguistic usage as developed in European nationalist movements: the French Republic (‘Marianne’), Britannia and so on. It is also an amplification and extension of the role of the individual woman as articulated in Indian nationalist discourse—the role of provider and nourisher, luxuriant, beautiful and generous by nature, and, of course, capable of enormous sacrifice and suffering.

Woman’s place as Mother and Nurturer, begetter of glorious sons of Aryavarta, has been underlined by several scholars in recent times and needs no further elaboration here. It has also been shown that Woman appears in Indian (Hindu) nationalist discourse as Container or Vehicle, the repository of Indian (Hindu) tradition, the essence, the ‘inner’ side, the spirituality and greatness of Hindu civilization. Here, again, Matri-Bhumi, Bharat Mata, Woman writ large, is an amplification of the image of individual upper-caste (‘middle class’?) Hindu women: ‘traditionally’ dressed, ‘traditional’ in taste, eternally serving, self-sacrificing, gentle, tolerant, passive.

Woman appears in this discourse, finally, and perhaps most obviously, as Property. The Hindu is being worsted everywhere—in his own country and in foreign lands. His women are being raped. The Hindus have been completely wiped out. Their property has been looted. Their women have been raped... The association of women and property, ‘ladies’ and cattle, is very striking indeed. Recall the prayer for ‘milch cows and strong bulls, fleet horses and cultured ladies.’ Or consider Shraddhanand’s advice to the Hindus that ‘the best way to avoid conflict with Muhammadans is to take care of your own women and children. As property and as sacred symbol, Woman is in an interestingly parallel position to the Cow in Hindu discourse. Yet her position is in some respects worse: for as bearers of a powerful, necessary but dangerous sexuality, and as potentially independent actors, women are threatening in a way that cows are not. As the symbol of the nation and repository of its great traditions, Woman is Pure—the spiritual side and inner strength of nationalist discourse. But as a sexual entity, that is also represented as being primitive, innocent and irrational, Woman is at the same time Impure—a lesser thing than man.

This Impurity is evident at regular intervals: during the monthly period, pregnancy, child-birth, when the ‘Hindu woman’, herself polluted, can pollute those who come in contact with her. But Impurity, or its potential, is present in a more continuous sense as well. The sexual desire of women, combined with their innocence and lack of rationality (their ‘primitive’ instincts), means that they may easily turn from their quintessential role as mothers, wives and widows into temptresses and ‘loose’ women, threatening order, morality and the appropriate division between men’s and women’s spheres. Ignorant and weak, Woman is easily misled and often sullied. Here, the difference between the Woman and the Cow as symbols becomes apparent. The Cow, in no way threatening to the community and the dominance of men, is never impure. It can never be made impure, only killed. Note, for example, the very different kinds of sanctions contained in the ‘circular letters’ or patias that formed a part of the Hindu call to arms for action against Muslims in the Shahabad (Bihar) strike of 1917. ‘Whatever Hindu, on seeing this patia, will not come, shall incur the guilt of killing 5 [or 7, or 12] cows.’ Compare that with the sanctions involving women: if you do not circulate the patias, and follow their injunctions for specified actions against local Muslims, then ‘you do mount on your daughter, drink your wife’s piss, and mount on your sister’s daughter. It would be better indeed to marry your mother to a Musalman...’

There were other times when the ‘Hindu’ sacrifice of their women passed from metaphor to grim reality. Perhaps the most unnerving episode in the still largely untold history of the Partition of India flows from the Hindu practice of sacrificing women who are said to have been polluted. When the Indian and Pakistani Governments initiated a move after the ravages of Partition to trace and reclaim their new nations such of their female nationals as had been abducted, raped, forcibly married or otherwise left on the ‘wrong’ side of the border, the Indian representatives quickly found themselves involved in a struggle to persuade many abducted Hindu women to return to their families and relatives. For the women were far from certain which was the worse fate: staying on, captured and confined in an alien country, or returning, stained and probably unacceptable to their own community and kin.
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The family has been an important symbol of both community and nation in India, marking as it supposedly does the domain of natural kinship and oneness—and Woman is of course central to the structure and reproduction of the family. The body of Woman, however, becomes the site for much of the punishment that is deemed necessary to expiate the sins of family, community and nation: ‘sins’ which, all too often, involve men’s deviations from prescribed moral, social or political codes. In Shahabad in 1917, the sacrifice of women’s bodies was seen as the chief means of preserving the interests of the community. On the Indo-Pakistan frontier in 1947, the recovery of women’s bodies—even under duress—was seen as necessary justice for the new nation.

The point that emerges from the Hindu nationalist discourse is that Woman—‘pure’ and ‘impure’ at one and the same time—is not only to be protected but also disciplined and controlled. The emphasis on modesty, on the place of woman in the kitchen and inside the home, the promotion of carefully structured, limited and separate education for girls, Dayanand Saraswati’s prescription of niyoga (strictly regulated sexual relationships for the purpose of procreation) in order to prevent widows from straying into ‘immorality’, were all part of this drive to protect, discipline and maintain control in an era when the needs of the larger community had clearly changed in important ways. But with all that the main task of the (male) community was seen as being that of regaining its strength, in other words its manliness, and thereby protecting its women, its property and its dharma.

Several scholars have written of the great emphasis placed on baahubal, physical strength, and on traditions of military glory and valour in the nationalist, and Hindu, discourse of the later nineteenth century. At the back of this was a perception that Hindu publicists and thinkers shared with nineteenth century colonial writers—that ‘the Hindus’ were singularly lacking in manliness and military vigour. For the colonialists, this was part of the long, unchanging history of Hindustan, a consequence of its climatic conditions. For Hindu leaders, there was need for a differently constructed history and hard training and effort in the present to make up for this lack. Hence the discovery of the heroic Sikhs, Marathas and Rajputs as the common ancestors of all Hindus, be they Bengali, Gujarati or Tamilian. Hence Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya’s construction of Krishna as a perfect, controlled, rational man of action, untouched by any element of playfulness or eroticism. Hence, too, Vivekananda’s prescription of beef and football as ready means for the regeneration of the Hindus.54

The emphasis on military valour and training has continued unchanged in Hindu discourse from then until now. Golwalkar speaks for the whole body of Hindu propagandists:

No nation can hope to survive with its young men given over to sensuality and effeminacy … In the First World War, the Generalissimo of the ‘Allied Forces’ was Marshall Foch, a Frenchman. Such was the heroic state of that nation at that time that they fought the Germans with grim resolve and won the war ultimately. They even pocketed a sizeable portion of Germany. But after the victory, Frenchmen succumbed to sensuality and enjoyment. They lost themselves in drinking, singing and dancing with the result that in spite of their huge military machine and their formidable ‘Maginot line’, France collapsed within fifteen days of the German onslaught during the Second World War. The sudden and total collapse of France was due to effeminacy which had sapped the energy of the heroic manhood of France.55

Or, as he put it in more optimistic vein on another occasion, ‘The Race spirit [of the Hindus] has been awakening. The lion was not dead, only sleeping. He is rousing himself up again and the world has to see the might of the regenerated Hindu Nation’ strike down the enemy’s hosts with its mighty arm … At no distant date the world shall see it and tremble with fear ….’56 The world understands nothing but the language of strength, the argument goes. The ‘true Dharma’ is the ‘Kshatra Dharma’—the warrior’s ‘philosophy of victory’. The ‘Hindus’, grown weak, must become strong again if they are to protect their women, their property and their rights. ‘भय विद्व दृष्टि न प्रदर्शि’(Without Fear, there can be no Love)57. Hindus must therefore instil fear among the non-Hindus who live with them before true love can emerge. It was in accordance with this line of thinking that militant Hindu organizations decided to support the British war effort in India and seek military training for Hindus during the Second World War, and that V.D. Savarkar, President of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha at this time advanced the slogan, ‘Hinduize all Politics and Militarize Hindudom!’
As against this, femininity, non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi have come in for bitter criticism in militant Hindu writings. Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee and others have pointed out how Gandhi was able to overturn, or at least problematize, many of the most deeply loved assumptions of Western colonial thought—about the inherent inferiority of ‘masculinity’, ‘rationality’, centralized state power and so on. In certain contexts, indeed, Gandhism privileged androgyny and femininity over masculinity. By contrast, in the militant Hindu discourse that we have been considering, it is ‘masculinity’ in precisely its Western, colonial construction, where it is equated with military strength, violence, bourgeois rationality and a stiff upper lip, that reigns supreme.

Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi are held equally responsible for the decline and emasculation of the Hindus—through their ‘mealy-mouthed formulas of Ahimsa and spiritual brotherhood.’ The founders of Buddhism and Jainism are at times treated with some sympathy on the ground that they advocated ‘relative Ahimsa’ in an age when this philosophy had some meaning. Not so Gandhi who is said to have espoused a creed of ‘absolute non-violence.’ On account of this creed, the ‘glorious struggle for national freedom’ which had lasted for a thousand years was shamelessly surrendered in the thirty years of Gandhi’s leadership of the national movement, and the Hindus were forced to accept the ‘unchallenged domination of the aggressor over huge portions of our land.’

Virtues like non-violence and tolerance are all very well—and every Hindu imbibes the lesson of tolerance along with ‘his’ mother’s milk, wrote Savarkar—but historical context and political circumstances must determine the extent to which these virtues may be applied. In respect to intolerant foreign religions, ‘the very extremely enraged intolerance, which seeks to retaliate their atrocities with super-atrocious reprisals itself becomes a virtue.’

It is in this context that the RSS, Hindu Mahasabha and other such extreme Right-wing Hindu organizations have raised the question, periodically from the 1940s until today, how Mahatma Gandhi with his ‘feminine’ charkha (spinning-wheel) can possibly be considered the ‘Father of the Nation’? In very recent years, they have even begun to celebrate the actions of Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, as the harbinger of another Hindu tradition and the symbol of another nation—one wedded not to ‘femininity’ and Non-Violence but to ‘masculinity’ and Violence, not to Truth but to Victory.

VI

One final question that needs to be addressed is why the militant Hindu construction of community, nation and history has had such wide appeal, especially in recent times. An adequate response to this question would require an analysis of a very different kind from that attempted in the preceding pages. But a few points of relevance that emerge from the above discussion may be noted here.

The appeal of this Hindu construction has much to do with two factors that we have indicated. The first is a widespread assumption that since the ‘religious’ condition, the need to believe in something larger and beyond oneself and this world, is amongst the most deeply felt needs of human beings, organized religion and the community of religion is, somehow, ‘natural’. In other words, attachment to particular religions or religious traditions is taken to be automatic, even inborn. The existence of something called a common ‘Hindu’ interest and a universal ‘Hindu’ solidarity follows as a matter of course. I hope, however, that the preceding pages have shown that this is far from being the case, and the identification of a common ‘Hindu’ interest is not only a very difficult but also a deeply interested move.

A second factor that works in favour of the Hindu construction is the ability of Hindu discourse to appropriate for itself the language of the ‘truly’ national—even as it speaks, or perhaps because it speaks simultaneously in several different voices. Consider the imbrication of ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’ in Swami Shraddhanand’s writings on the need for Hindu sangathan. ‘In the following pages,’ Shraddhanand wrote in the preface to his 1924 pamphlet, ‘an attempt has been made to describe the history of the Hindu decline . . . As a corollary an attempt has been made to show the way to the nation’s emancipation,’ (p. 13).

The Hindu Rashtra Mandirs that he wanted built were to be dedicated to the worship of ‘the three mother-spirits’—the cow; Saraswati, the goddess of learning; and Bhumi-mata (Mother earth). ‘To remove any doubts that the last of these might refer to nature (the goddess of plenty or the provider of food) alone, Shraddhanand asked for a ‘life-like’ map of Mother India to be put up in a prominent place ‘so that every child of the Matri-Bhumi may daily bow before the Mother and renew his pledge to restore her to the ancient pinnacle of glory . . .’ It was as part of this nationalist position that Shraddhanand called not only for the integration
of ‘untouchables’, steps to prevent child marriages and permit the marriages of widows, protection of the cow but, along with all that, the introduction of a uniform script (Devanagari) and national language (Hindi) as ‘absolutely necessary’ for the advancement of the nation.

A similar mixing of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ is encountered at other critical junctures of India’s recent history. For instance, the Rath Yatra taken out in September–October 1990 by L.K. Advani, then President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to mobilize support for the construction of a new Ram Temple at the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, was initially proclaimed as a purely religious, non-political undertaking. At a later stage, after the arrest of Advani and the stopping of Rath Yatra, it was declared to have been a purely political exercise. The BJP was a political organization, Advani said, and he himself a ‘humble’ political worker who left religion to the religious leaders, i.e., sadhus and mahants.

The movement for the Ram Temple, it was argued, was more than a religious movement: it was a national movement. Ram was not only a Hindu deity, he was a great national hero. It was not necessary that every Indian, Hindu or non-Hindu, worship Ram: but to revere his memory as part of the great cultural heritage of India—that was a condition of Indian citizenship. This was not an argument about religion, it was claimed; it was an argument about culture.

In fact, of course, it was both. If religion is important in India, nationalism is not less so. Indeed, the political importance of the ‘national’ cannot be overstated in an age when the discourse of nationalism has come to have enormous power, and in a country where (as in all other Third World countries and now, increasingly, in so many of the Second World) the manifest difficulties of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ keep the question of appropriate political arrangement more alive than in the advanced capitalist countries of the West.

What is seen as being the ‘natural’ and the ‘true’ in this context has a great deal to do with historiographical practice, repetition and political circumstances that help to perpetuate these. Thus, the ‘Hindu’ view of history is bolstered by the way in which the history of India has been written up and purveyed from James Mill’s day until our own. And it is reinforced by the very history of strife between Hindus and Muslims which took on an entirely new dimension from the later nineteenth century, became a central feature of Indian politics in the 1920s, reached a ghastly denouement in the period of Partition, and has recurred frequently since then. Here, propaganda and strife have fed one another and led on to far more vicious and generalized forms of violence, and far more vicious and generalized constructions of Self and Other, than were known before.

In particular, the partition of 1947 has left a deeper mark on the practice of Indian history and politics than is generally acknowledged. In India, as in Pakistan, the history of all ‘Muslim politics’ and, in a less obvious but in my view, equally emphatic way, ‘Hindu politics’ is written up as the pre-history of Partition—or, what amounts to the same thing, the struggle to avert it. The history of the ‘Indian Muslims’ becomes a history of ‘Muslim politics’, which is quickly reduced to the history of the Pakistan movement and, further, to the history of the Muslim League from its foundation in 1906 to the establishment of the new State in 1947. Indeed, the history of the Pakistan movement is pushed much further back to incorporate the life and career of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, now widely described as the founder of the new Muslim consciousness and ‘modern’ Muslim politics, that is to say, in other words, of something called ‘Muslim separatism’, therefore of the Muslim League and, naturally, of the movement for Pakistan.

It is not surprising that Pakistani nationalism and Pakistani nationalist historians should favour such a reading of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century history. What is striking is that their framework is largely shared by others who are not such firm believers in the ‘naturalness’ of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent. Hindu propagandists and historians, in their turn, describe ‘separatism’ as an inevitable consequence of the ‘Muslim’ character—in India and elsewhere. The movement for Pakistan, then, begins for them too with the very first Muslim efforts at reform and organization in the nineteenth century, if not with the first arrival of Islam in India. If all this is granted to ‘Muslim politics’, it cannot, I submit, be denied to ‘Hindu politics’ either. The history of ‘Hindu politics’ has, therefore, been treated in much the same way—as part of a very old tradition, as an expression of ‘natural’ solidarity and as the ‘natural’ course of political development in India.

The point that needs to be made at the end here, even if it has been made many times before, is that this argument is fundamentally ahistorical, that nationalisms everywhere have been long and deeply contested, that ‘communities’ and ‘nations’ do not arrive ready-made, springing from the womb of the earth fully formed, natural and unalterable. It also
needs to be stressed that nationalist discourse, and with it what is called communal discourse in India is always political—however much it pretends to speak in the 'non-political' language of religion and community.

The question of political control of the state, and of the consequences of such control, are central to the construction of modern national and community identities. The process of homogenizing and sanitizing, suppressing as it does evidence of internal differentiation and struggle within the claimed community or nation, is a central part of the national/communal reconstruction of the national/communal past. Both the discourse and the politics that go with it are the handiwork of a specific age and a specific class which needs to be situated in its particular historical location, in spite of its great political power in our times and in spite of its fairly successful appropriation of the language of the natural and the eternal.
20. This translation is found on the title page of the 4th edn.
21. Prithviraj Chauhan, King of Delhi and Ajmer, who was defeated by Muhammad Ghori at the second battle of Tarain in 1192 AD.
22. Perhaps the most barbaric indication of this is found in the slogan that has accompanied many recent instances of sectarian violence, “घरेरा की सत्ता, जाओ पालितान या कब्ज़ातान!”
25. The same argument is now put forward with regard to ‘secularism’. Interestingly, no such question is raised when it comes to ‘nationalism’, ‘industrialism’ or ‘capitalism’.
33. ibid., p. 143.
35. ibid.
41. I owe this reference and the points arising out of it to Veer Bharat Talwar, see his *Jharkhand*.
42. *We*, p. 62.
43. ibid.
44. *Hindu Sangathan*, p. 141.
45. An ancient Hindu prayer approvingly cited by Shraddhanand in ibid., p. 93.
47. ibid., pp. 120–01.
50. These quotations come from two leaflets circulated in Bhagalpur during the sectarian violence of October–November 1989.
52. See my *Construction of Communalism*, Appendix 2.
54. It may be argued that militant Hindus have sought to change Hindu practice in this regard, and that this episode is not linked in any way with their political actions. But the point is that this politics is part of a larger discourse, upon which it feeds, which it fans into flame, and which it can therefore scarcely change at will.
56. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, pp. 317–18 (emphasis added); cf. the sections entitled “Be Men with a Capital M” and “Potent Men vs. Patton Tanks”.
57. Golwalkar, *We*, p. 17.
58. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, p. 377; Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs*, p. 55. This last slogan is also found among the slogans contained in leaflets circulated in Bhagalpur in 1989.
62. ibid., p. 169 (see also, p. 185 and pp. 394–95). Cf. the Organizer’s recent pronouncements that “the need of the hour” now is ‘not tolerance, but courage’.