

Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity: The Vishva Hindu Parishad

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In 1983 India witnessed an interesting mass-scale ritual intended to promote Hindu nationalism. Several processions traversed the country in what was called Ekatmatayajna, a procession for national unity, which reached, according to the organizers' own estimate, some sixty million people. In 1984 this was followed up by the Ramjanmabhumi-muktiyajna, a procession to liberate the birthplace of Lord Rama. This ritual action, which still continues in 1992, aims at removing the Muslim mosque from the site alleged to be the birthplace of the god Rama. This cause has developed into one of the hottest issues in Indian politics over the last five years. Hundreds of people have died in riots connected to these processions. A major political party has very successfully embraced the issue of Rama's birthplace in its electoral campaign, and in 1990, the Indian government fell over it. In this chapter I describe the organizational structure and ideology of the Vishva Hindu Parishad or World Hindu Council which has organized these mass cultural performances. Attention is given to the dynamics of ritual/political action in the movement, since the VHP achieves through them an appeal which goes beyond that of its official doctrine.

The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) was founded in Bombay on an auspicious day, the birthday of Lord Krishna, 29 August 1964. One hundred and fifty religious leaders were invited to Sandeepany Sadhanalaya, the center of a Hindu missionary movement headed by Swami Chinmayanand. The host had been instrumental in organizing the conference and became its president. Shivram Shankar Apte, a worker for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or National Volunteer Corps,¹ was elected its general secretary. In the meeting it was decided that the organization would have the following objectives:

- (1) To take steps to arouse consciousness, to consolidate and strengthen the Hindu Society.
- (2) To protect, develop and spread the Hindu values of

Some ideas in this essay are further developed in my book *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, published by the University of California Press.

life—ethical and spiritual. (3) To establish and reinforce contacts with and help all Hindus living abroad. (4) To welcome back all who had gone out of the Hindu fold and to rehabilitate them as part and parcel of the Universal Hindu Society. (5) To render social services to humanity at large. It has initiated Welfare Projects for the 170 million down trodden brethren, who have been suffering for centuries. These projects include schools, hospitals, libraries etc. (6) Vishva Hindu Parishad, the World Organization of six hundred million at present residing in 80 countries, aspire [*sic*] to revitalize the eternal Hindu Society by rearranging the code of conduct of our age old Dharma to meet the needs of the changed times. (7) To eradicate the concept of untouchability from the Hindu Society.²

The conference also decided to organize a World Hindu Convention on the occasion of the Kumbh Mela festival, 22 January 1966, in Allahabad. Kumbh and Magh Melas are important bathing festivals held at regular intervals in holy places. They are visited by millions of Hindus and provide a crucial occasion for the laity to meet monk-mendicants (*sadhus*). A second World Hindu Conference was held in 1979, also in Allahabad, with the Dalai Lama as its chief guest. It is hard to know from the existing documentation what kind of decisions were taken at these conferences, but one may infer that it was there the VHP decided to start work both in tribal areas and among overseas Hindus.

It is important to note here that Hinduism does not know any overarching church-like organization. It is rather a field of related religious discourses and practices, organized by a great number of diverse types of religious specialists. An important form of organization in Hinduism is the religious community, whose core is a group of religious specialists—often celibate monks (*sadhus*)—who act as “spiritual” leaders (*gurus*) for a community of lay followers. The main division between these religious communities is between the Vaishnavas, who have taken the god Vishnu—with his main incarnations, Rama and Krishna—as their “chosen deity,” and the Shaivas, who have taken the god Shiva as their “chosen deity.” The Shaiva monks appear to be the best organized under a number of regional leaders, called Shankaracharyas. Even here, however, these leaders have only limited authority over the Hindu community. Since the relation between lay devotee and guru depends on personal choice, one can understand the fragmented nature of this kind of organization. Moreover, one has to appreciate that various gurus within one region compete with each other for support from the laity. This competition sometimes occurs not only between individual leaders, but also between larger units of organization, such as ascetic orders. Those leaders able to gain large followings through this competition are considered “big men” with considerable power and authority. The main feat of the VHP is that it has brought a great number of the main religious leaders (*gurus*) under the banner of Hindu nationalism.

A meeting of important religious leaders on 20 June 1982 in Delhi gave the VHP organization its final shape. It was to have two levels: “an assembly of religion” (*dharmansad*) as a central body, and on the state level, “advisory committees” (*marg-*

darshak mandal) whose members were leaders of the various participating religious communities. While the VHP prefers being not too specific about the way it operates, we can infer from data I have gathered that a relatively small number of high-powered industrialists—such as Jaidayal Dalmia, high officials such as justices of regional High Courts, aristocrats like VHP President Maharana Bhagwat Singh Mewar, and high office-bearers of the RSS—work together with influential gurus in a kind of informal management structure that makes the main policy decisions. The RSS always supplies the general secretary, the main executive officer in the VHP. For the rest, the VHP is organizationally independent of the RSS.

It has recently been argued that the VHP was founded on the initiative of the leader of the RSS, M. S. Golwalkar, to give RSS an opportunity to work with leaders of Hindu religious movements.³ There is probably a good deal of truth in this statement. As we see later in this chapter, there is no doubt the RSS was actively involved in organizing the political rituals staged by the VHP in the 1980s. However, it is important for understanding the success of the VHP to see the crucial differences between the RSS and the VHP. To see the VHP as simply an instrument of the RSS, part of the so-called RSS family of organizations, as is routinely done in India, is to underestimate the extent to which the VHP goes beyond the RSS in its articulation of what I call “modern Hinduism.”

The RSS focuses on the physical culture of young men in a way reminiscent of Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts or the fascist youth groups of pre-war Germany and Italy. Such features as military discipline and physical exercise feed on the well-established culture of wrestling among young men in North India. This culture has strong religious roots in asceticism and celebrates masculinity and age-grade bonding. Its discourse connects the healthy body with the healthy nation. Related to its disciplinary aspect is the members' unquestioning attitude toward their leader, making the RSS one of the best functioning organizations in India. Religious ritual and doctrine are absolutely minimal.

The VHP, on the other hand, is an organization in which religious leaders play a major role. These leaders are united in their wish to promote a certain kind of “spiritual” Hinduism through ritual propaganda, but, otherwise, each has his own followers and agenda. Because Hinduism does not have a central authority or a churchlike organization, it is almost miraculous to see the extent to which the VHP is able to keep all these independent leaders on one platform, without major conflicts and breakups.⁴ This unity is due to the extent the discourse of Modern Hinduism has come to be shared by these leaders and the extent to which the VHP has been able to focus on issues with great unifying potential. These differences in organizational structure and discursive style between RSS and VHP are important and explain, at least partly, the greater success of the VHP in comparison to the RSS.

Still it is difficult to assess the VHP's following among the general population, although the following is probably as broad as that of the constituent religious communities. These communities have emerged from a wide cross-section of the urbanized middle class and the middle peasants, with the notable exclusion of tribals and untouchables. It is to them that the VHP tries to reach out. In the 1970s the VHP

focused on missionary work in tribal areas and on the organization of Hindus overseas. In 1982 it claimed to have 302 district units under which there were 2,700 branches, and outside of India, to have 3,000 branches in twenty-three countries. Its total membership at that point was 118,522, with 233 full-time workers;⁵ no doubt the organization has grown considerably in the decade since then. Only in the 1980s did it gain prominence on the Indian political scene by the creative use of political ritual on a grand scale.

Before turning to the two political rituals that boosted the VHP into prominence in the 1980s, we must examine the VHP's ideology. In short, the VHP strives to create a modern Hinduism as the national religion of India, and in this way nationalism embraces religion as the defining characteristic of the nation. The VHP is certainly not an "antimodernist" movement. In fact if nationalism is the discourse of modernity, the VHP's project is fundamentally modernist. It articulates certain long-term transformations in Hindu discourse and practice which largely feed on Orientalist understandings of India and are thus deeply implicated in Western conceptions of modernity. Rather than rejecting capitalist development, science, and technology, the VHP attempts to nationalize these signs of modernity. What it does reject is the secular state, but its argument is based on the modern democratic principle of majority rule.⁶ It argues that the "majority community" should rule the country, while the "minority communities," such as Muslims and Christians, should accept that rule as a political reality.

If we take fundamentalism as antimodern, as Bruce Lawrence does in his book *Defenders of God*, we lose sight of the fact that many fundamentalist movements are not only implicated in modernity as a material structure but that, as a countercontext, fundamentalisms may share some basic discursive premises with the modernist text.⁷ This is certainly the case with the VHP. What we might consider are the ways in which indigenous discursive traditions are transformed through their encounter with colonizing discourses from the West.

Modern Hinduism, as defined by the VHP, is the religion of the Indian nation. The term "Hindu" embraces all people who believe in, respect, or follow the eternal values of life—ethical and spiritual—that have evolved in Bharat (India). This is remarkably similar to Robert Frykenberg's definition of Hinduism as "nativism," and it shows the collusion of the VHP's definition of Hinduism and the scholarly discourse which portrays Hinduism as a civilization rather than as a religion.⁸ This very broad definition transcends internal differences of a doctrinal, organizational, or regional nature. While it might appear that Indian Islam and Christianity could also be included in such a definition, one of the VHP's key themes holds that Hindu society is threatened by Islam and Christianity, which are forces of disintegration. Hindu civilization is seen as originating from the Indian soil, while Islam and Christianity are "foreign" despite their long presence in India. Muslims and Christians can thus redeem themselves when they realize that they are in fact converted Hindus and return to the Hindu fold.

A recurring theme in VHP ideology is Hindu weakness. Hindu society has to be defended against "external" weakness, caused by conversions to "foreign" religion,

and against its "internal" weakness caused by differences and conflicts among Hindus. Unity is the remedy of weakness, and unity is accomplished through the rhetoric of "nativism." However, this is not to exclude nonresident Indians. On the contrary. At the founding session of the VHP there were delegates from Nairobi and Trinidad, and in 1992 the VHP was probably the strongest transnational movement among Hindus all over the world. Thus there is an interesting interplay of "foreignness" and "nativeness," of "nationalism" and "transnationalism" in the VHP which seems germane to many of the movements we are discussing in this project under the rubric of fundamentalism. The marginality felt by migrants to other parts of the world makes them into important agents of innovation at home. The "foreign" experience of innovators like the Hindu leader Vivekananda or the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Dharma-pala thus has a kind of paradigmatic value for the millions of South Asians who, by reconstructing their religion abroad, have a decisive influence on its transformation in their places of origin.

The theme of Hindu weakness derives from nineteenth-century discourse on "foreign rule." The VHP perpetuates an argument of decline from a golden age in which a just society based on Hindu dharma (moral law) gave way to a long period of barbaric oppression, first by Muslim rulers (from 1200) and then by the British (from 1800). While this argument is related to a more common Hindu belief that we live in the worst of times, *kali-yuga*, there is a strong activist element here which demands that this decline be reversed and Hindu society redeemed. One way of doing this is through religious reform.

This theme has been most eloquently elaborated by the Arya Samaj, a reformist movement that originated in the nineteenth century and focused on a return to the ancient religious standards of the Vedas, which could be retrieved through reconstruction of texts. The very "foreignness" of this discourse, with its emphasis on textual purity rather than on the purity of its interpreters and its repudiation of practices such as image worship, greatly limited the appeal of the Arya Samaj. Due to its Western fundamentalist-style scripturalism the Arya Samaj remained a marginal movement rather than the popular Hindu answer to modern challenges. Therefore I argue that its major importance is not found in its message or appeal, but in its impact on Hindu discourse in general. For example, the Arya Samaj shared with its "orthodox" detractors the notion of the sacredness of Mother Cow. By organizing cow protection societies it shaped the defense of Hinduism against British and Muslim "butchers." Even more importantly, it set a model for the communication of Hindu nationalism. The cow protection movement, though initiated by Arya Samaj reformists, had nothing to do with reform, but much to do with religious nationalism. The Arya Samaj thus demonstrated the ability of organized activism to stop Hindu weakness and decline.

This message was received by those who strongly opposed reformism. While reformism is historically at the roots of Hindu nationalism, it is not synonymous with it. There is certainly scope for activism without reform, and this is explored and exploited by the VHP, a salient feature of which is its propagation of Hindu unity by obliterating differences in doctrine and practice. This strategy is indeed antithetical to the one taken by reformism.⁹

The VHP is therefore not a scripturalist movement. It avoids disputes on “fundamental scriptures,” since its aim is to unite Reformism and “orthodoxy” (sometimes called Sanatana Dharma) in all its manifold forms. The VHP even wants to include Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism by defining them as part of an all-embracing Hindu civilization in which “Hindu” refers to the sacred soil from which all these religions spring. This strategy is often presented as part of the “tolerance” that characterizes Hinduism in the eyes of both Hindus and outsiders.

Yet this characterization has a specific orientalist history. “Religious tolerance” as an ideal in the West derives from an abstraction and universalization of religion which is part of the Western discourse of “modernity.” The move in seventeenth-century Europe to produce a universal definition of natural religion as existing in all societies shows a fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, but also the rise of new discourses and practices connected to modern nation-states.¹⁰ A growing emphasis on religious tolerance as a positive value is thus related to the marginalization of religious institutions in Europe. At the same time it replaces the violence between religious groups with the violence between nation-states. This discourse is brought to bear on the Muslim and Hindu populations incorporated in the modern world-system. Muslims, the old rivals of the Christian West, are labeled “fanatics” and “bigoted,” while Hindus are seen in a more positive light as “tolerant.” At the same time, this labeling explains why Muslims have ruled Hindu India and why Hindus have to be “protected” by the British. In short, I contend that the attribution of “tolerance” to Hinduism is a product of a specific orientalist history of ideas. As such, it has also come to dominate Hindu discourse on Hinduism to the extent that tolerance is now one of the most important characteristics of Hinduism, despite the fact that, as a doctrinal notion, it had no specific place in Hindu discursive traditions.¹¹

As observed by the German Indologist Paul Hacker, “tolerance” is a poor translation for what is in fact Hindu “inclusivism,” a form of hierarchical relativism.¹² There is the Hindu idea—often repeated by the VHP—that there are many paths leading to God as well as many gods. An important underlying conception here is “hierarchy.” The many gods and paths are manifestations of the One who is formless. Some of these manifestations are higher than others. Moreover, they perform different functions in a hierarchical order. The general idea seems to be that other paths do not have to be denied as heretical, but that they are inferior and thus cater to inferior beings. This relation between the devotee and his chosen god is thus one of co-substantiality. This might be one of the reasons Hindus visit Muslim shrines for rituals of healing, since Muslim saints are said to control the powers of darkness. At least in some contexts this attribution associates Muslims with those very powers. Some Muslim practices are thus included in a Hindu cosmological framework, but given an inferior position. At the same time this inferiority precludes Muslim participation in practices at higher Brahmanical temples. The point is that modern Hindu thinkers have combined hierarchical relativism with orientalist discourse on “tolerance” to include all religions in the Vedanta, the spiritual “essence” of Hinduism in its philosophical form, as in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s famous formula: “The Vedanta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance.”¹³

Much of what I have just said about "tolerance" could also be applied to a concept such as Gandhi's "nonviolence." It is sometimes difficult for Westerners to grasp violence perpetuated by Hindu monks who speak and act militantly, since there is the persistent notion of "nonviolent" otherworldliness attributed to Hindu "spirituality." Again, while nonviolence had a place in Hindu discursive traditions as a rejection of the violence of animal sacrifice, which has resulted in vegetarianism among some groups, the idea that Hindus would always choose nonviolent means because of their religion is Gandhi's construction of Hindu spirituality. Hindu monks have a long and interesting history of warfare related to trading which continues to the present day.¹⁴ There is considerable historical evidence of violent struggle between different Hindu religious groups as well as between Hindus and Buddhists, Hindus and Jains, and Hindus and Muslims. It is modern Hinduism that ignores these traditions in its self-presentation through the mirror of the West, while at the same time manifesting a behavior that is not nonviolent by any stretch of the imagination. The construction of tolerance as a Hindu virtue is used by the VHP not only to unite competing Hindu groups, but also to complain about the intolerance of those who do not want to be included, such as Muslims.

In my view, the VHP's ideas are directly derived from the discourse of modern, spiritual Hinduism, and the organization takes a kind of "Oriental spiritualism," which it offered as a package to Western audiences, and brings it back to India. On the level of discourse, therefore, there is little difference between VHP propaganda and the sayings of the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda (1863–1902). Moreover, Vivekananda had the same audience as the VHP. The difference lies in the historical development of that audience, the modern middle class.

What is striking in the VHP is the extent to which the leadership of a modern guru like Chinmayananda, who has a middle-class following in urban India and in the United States, is accepted. As a disciple of Shivanand and a co-disciple of Chidanand, the founder of the Divine Life Society, he belongs squarely in modern Hinduism. After a period of living in the Himalayas with his second guru Tapovanam, Chinmayananda began in the 1950s to give lectures which he called "sacrifices of learning" (*jnanayajna*, no pun intended on the Sanskrit word). At that time he was opposed by the "orthodox" because of his position against caste and gender differentiation in spiritual education. Gradually he became a well-known guru, and today his schedule includes annual stops in India, Malaysia, Africa, and summer camps in the United States. His movement is similar to the Ramakrishna Mission, and one can see a direct link between his teachings and those of Vivekanand.

This kind of teaching has moved from the margin to the center of "monastic" Hinduism. Even gurus with a much longer pedigree and a firm footing in established high-caste communities, like some of the Shankaracharyas, have begun to use the discourse of modern Hinduism. For example, the influential Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu makes extensive tours throughout India to express the need for renewal of the Hindu spirit, which he feels is threatened from all sides.¹⁵ He is involved in the "uplift" of Untouchables and in the construction of Hindu mission hospitals, social matters of no concern at all to his immediate predecessor. Moreover,

all modern religious leaders seem to follow Chinmayananda's lead in that they are interested in the Indians overseas. All this suggests that the flow of daily experience of an important constituency in India, the middle class, has caught up with its Western counterparts and that, as such, modern Hinduism caters to similar needs. This is reflected in VHP discourse on "individual growth," "social concerns," and religion as "a code of conduct for every man to make life a success," which sounds like the credo of a success-oriented Western middle class. If there is a "mainstream" constituency for the VHP's discourse on spiritual Hinduism as India's "national identity," it is the middle class, together with those who aspire to its status.

However, the attempt to "mainstream" India is not without its problems and contradictions. Inclusion and exclusion are aspects of the historical processes of identity formation which have to be understood in terms of their internal dynamics as well as their changing context. The Sikhs are an interesting case in point. Two of their important leaders in the early 1960s, Master Tara Singh and Ghyani Bhupendra Singh (president of the Shiromani Akali Dal), were among the founders of the VHP. Tara Singh addressed the 1964 conference in Bombay as follows: "I am confident that once the Hindus and Sikhs embrace each other, it will send a new current of revitalization all over the country and the movement shall flood the hearts of even those who live abroad."¹⁶ This was not exactly what happened in the 1980s. Clearly, separatism has a greater importance on the Sikh agenda today than does Hindu unity.

Another important example of the politics of inclusion rather than tolerance of difference is the VHP's program to bring tribals and untouchables within the Hindu fold. The VHP has worked continuously to bring these groups within the Hindu nation, since their marginality makes them in the VHP view easy victims of "foreign" conversion by Christian and Muslim missions. These communities are beyond the pale in the Hindu view, but the mere fact that they live on "Hindu" territory means, in the logic of nationalism, that they should be part of the Hindu nation.

The VHP rhetoric on this point is simultaneously one of Gandhian development ideology (the so-called uplift of the tribals) and battle against competing missionary efforts. On the one hand VHP discourse feeds on Gandhian concepts of social reform in its attacks on the "evils of caste society." On the other hand, the missionary activities of the VHP among tribals can be interpreted as a continuation of the expansion of Hindu monastic groups in frontier areas. This long-term expansion has been re-framed in terms of social welfare and nation building. The VHP sees conversion to Christianity in the northeastern parts of India as the cause of the separatist movements in those areas.¹⁷ Similarly, VHP activities among untouchables gained an enormous boost in late 1982 after an untouchable subcaste in Tamil Nadu was converted to Islam. In the VHP rhetoric, "petro-dollars" became the master-trope not only to make Muslim missionary efforts suspect, but to demonstrate that the Hindu nation was threatened by world Islam. The Meenakshipuram conversions have been the most publicized issue in the VHP's "defense of Hinduism," which gained momentum with the Procession for Unity in 1983 and continued with the movement for liberating Hindu sites in 1984.

In short, VHP tries to formulate a modern Hinduism that can serve as the basis

of a Hindu nation. This goal brings it into conflict with the self-proclaimed secularism of the Indian state and with Muslims and Christians who cannot be included in its idea of the nation.

Nationalist Ritual in Modern Hinduism

Modern Hinduism cannot be made into the religion of the Indian nation through the spread of pamphlets by VHP workers. In fact, I argue, the VHP would have remained a fringe organization if it had not captured worldwide attention by staging mass performances of political ritual. The homogenization of religious identity in nationalism requires symbolic action which constructs and confirms the need for unity against the threatening Muslim Other. In this way the VHP develops a tradition in Hindu nationalism of which the several cow protection movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the best examples.

The first successful ritual of Hindu nationalism, organized by the VHP, was the Sacrifice for Unity (*Ekatmatayajna*) of November and December 1983, in which three large processions (*yatra*) traversed India.¹⁸ One went from Hardwar to Kanyakumari, the second from Gangasagar to Somnath, and the third from Kathmandu (Nepal) to Rameshwaram, inaugurated by the king of Nepal. At least forty-seven smaller processions (*upayatra*) of five days traversed other parts of the country and connected at appointed places with one of the three large processions. The routes taken by the processions were well-known pilgrimage routes connecting major religious centers, suggesting a geographical unity of India (*Bharatvarsha*) as a sacred area (*kshetra*) of Hindus.

In this event, pilgrimage was effectively transformed into a ritual of national integration. Processions of temple-chariots (*rathas*) are an important part of temple festivals in India. An image of the god is taken for a ride in his domain, confirming his territorial sovereignty and extending his blessings. The processions of the VHP made use of two "chariots," *rathas* in the modern form of new trucks, and so the symbolism of the temple-chariot was perpetuated, as was the militant symbolism of the "war-chariot" of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.¹⁹

On one of the two chariots of the VHP an image of Bharat Mata, Mother India, was carried. The Mother Goddess is worshiped in many forms in India, some of which are new. Santoshi Mata, Satisfying Mother, for example, conquered India in the 1960s under the influence of a very successful movie. The political use of mother symbolism is also nothing new in India. In Andhra Pradesh the regional party Telugu Desam has introduced a Telugu Mother Goddess, and the late prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi tried to use goddess symbolism for her own glorification. The connection between worship of the Mother Goddess and Mother India has been most forcefully made in Bengal, where the cult of the goddess is exceptionally strong. The Indian National Congress has chosen "Bande Mataram" ("Hail Mother"), a poem by nineteenth-century Bengali nationalist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, as the national anthem, despite the strong Hindu emphasis of this poem. Creation of an image rep-

resenting Bharat Mata is the VHP's contribution to this nationalist tradition. The other chariot contained an enormous waterpot (*kalasha*) filled with water from the Ganges and a smaller waterpot filled with local sacred water. This chariot was followed by a truck which sold Ganges water in small bottles. The Ganges is seen as a deity, and her water contains the power to purify from sin and to grant salvation. All the sacred water in the rest of India is a secondary derivation of the Ganges. In this way all rivers and temple-tanks are symbolically connected with the Ganges as the unifying symbol of Hindu India. The waterpot is one of the most important objects in Hindu ritual. It symbolizes power and auspiciousness.

Thus the processions of the Sacrifice for Unity made very effective use of an existing ritual repertoire which includes the Mother Goddess, the sacredness of Ganges water, and Lord Ram; the processions transformed this repertoire to communicate the message of Hindu unity. The VHP effected this transformation by using a ritual repertoire which engages generally accepted Hindu conceptions without running into conflict with specific doctrines espoused by one of the many religious movements represented in the VHP. It was also made perfectly clear that those who did not participate in this Hindu ritual could not be seen as part of the nation. Effectively, the message was as much about Hindu unity as about the Muslim Other.

The processions gained enormous publicity and enabled the VHP to start local branches in all parts of the country, forming the basis for a VHP movement to rebuild Hindu temples allegedly demolished by Muslim rulers and replaced by mosques. In 1984 the VHP made a strategic choice by starting with a "sacrifice to liberate the birthplace of Lord Ram" (Ramjanma-bhumimuktijajna), an ancient mosque in the North Indian pilgrimage center Ayodhya which was built in 1528 by a general of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty. The following details and other "historical facts" are disputed at present, with public debate in India occurring in such diverse places as university publications and newspapers.²⁰ According to local tradition which is followed by the VHP, the mosque was built to replace an even more ancient Hindu temple of the god Ram which had occupied the spot from the eleventh century C.E.²¹ The temple commemorated the place where Ram, the god-hero of the Ramayana, had been born. After destroying the temple the general used some of its materials, such as the carved pillars, to build his mosque. After annexing of the regional realm to which Ayodhya had given his name (Awadh) in 1856, the British decided to put a railing around the mosque and to raise a platform outside on which Hindus could worship, while Muslims were allowed to continue their prayers inside. After the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Indian government placed a guard outside the mosque, which was now declared out of bounds for both communities. However, on the eve of 23 December 1949 an image of Ram was placed in the mosque by a group of young Hindus who were never caught. The next day a rumor spread quickly that Lord Ram had appeared in the form of an image to claim the mosque as His temple. The ensuing riots were quelled by the army, but the image was never removed. Leaders of Hindu and Muslim groups filed suit to claim the place as theirs.

In 1984 the VHP began to demand that the lock on Ram's birthplace be opened.²² A procession, starting in Sitamarhi (the birthplace of Sita, Ram's wife), reached Ay-

odhya on Saturday, 6 October 1984. It consisted of not more than a few private cars carrying monks and trucks carrying large statues of Ram and his wife Sita under a banner with the slogan "Bharat Mata ki Jay" (Hail to Mother India). The next day, speeches were given in Ayodhya by VHP leaders and local abbots. None of these activities was very impressive. When the procession moved on to the state capital Lucknow, however, it gained considerably more attention. And when it moved on from Lucknow to Delhi, where the VHP intended to stage a huge rally, it was caught in the aftermath of the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, which turned national attention away from the Ayodhya issue. Nevertheless, in the following years the VHP continued to pressure politicians, resulting in a decision by the district and session judge of Faizabad on 14 February 1986 that the disputed site should be opened immediately to the public. This decision triggered communal violence all over North India, and on 30 March 1987 in New Delhi, Muslims staged their biggest protest since independence.

Today the mosque is open to the Hindu public, but its future is still contested. The VHP demands that the mosque be demolished and a Hindu temple built in its place. The Muslim Babri Masjid Action Committee demands the opening of the mosque for prayer and removal of the image. It argues that the Babri Masjid should be regarded as an unalienable place of Islamic worship under the authority of the Waqf Board (as overseer of religious endowments), whose sanctity should be protected by the state.

After the Faizabad judge's 1986 decision, the temple-mosque issue has been taken up increasingly by Indian political parties, and it played an important role in the 1989 elections. Although even the leader of the Congress Party, Rajiv Gandhi, insisted at a rally in Faizabad/Ayodhya that he supported the VHP case, the issue was made central by the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), a party with a long history of Hindu nationalism and direct ties with the RSS, and it gained considerably in the elections.

From this point onward—and probably as far back as 1986—the political agenda of the BJP was tied to the agenda of the VHP. We see a direct coordination of rituals, agitation, and political maneuvering by a high command made up of BJP, RSS, and VHP leaders and in fact an important overlap of functions. In 1992 Vijaye Raje Scindia was a vice-president of the BJP and a leader of the VHP; L. K. Advani and A. B. Vajpayee were leaders of the BJP, with a background in the RSS; an important leader of the RSS, Manohar Pingle, had the VHP in his portfolio. To a considerable extent the VHP leadership drew on the experience of retired members of the higher echelons of the Indian bureaucracy, such as former director-generals of police, former chief judges, former ministers, and so on.

After September 1989 the VHP engaged in the worship of "bricks of Lord Ram" (*ramshila*) in villages in North India and organized processions to bring these sacred bricks to Ayodhya for building a temple at Ram's birthplace in place of the mosque of Babar. It is estimated that some three hundred lives have been lost in connection with these "building processions." The heaviest casualties occurred in Bhagalpur in Bihar, where the Muslim population was almost wiped out. Eventually, the VHP was allowed to lay its foundation stones in a pit outside the mosque on so-called undis-

puted lands. Some of the stones prominently exhibited come from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and South Africa, as if to emphasize the transnational character of this nationalist enterprise.

In 1990 two major political developments affected the course of action regarding Ayodhya. First, the issue of Kashmir, where Muslim separatists seek to secede from India, flared up, with Muslims inflicting unprecedented violence against the Hindu population, causing many to leave that part of the country. The BJP took a strong anti-Pakistan stance toward this crisis, and in India this stance is always related to an anti-Muslim stance. Second, in September 1990, V. P. Singh's government decided to implement an earlier report of the Mandal Commission, which had suggested increasing considerably the number of reservations for members of the so-called Backward Classes in educational institutions and government service. This action resulted in widespread antireservation riots in which a number of students immolated themselves in a new form of protest.

Since the agitation around reservation imperiled the Hindu agenda of the VHP/BJP/RSS, L. K. Advani, the leader of the BJP, began a procession from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya, again a rath yatra, through ten states, with its goal the construction of the temple on 30 October 1990. This initiative met with great enthusiasm all over the country. Members of a recently established youth branch of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, offered a cup of their blood to their leader to show their determination. All this set a kind of time bomb, which ticked with every mile taken in the direction of Ayodhya. Mulayam Singh Yadav, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, in which state Ayodhya is located, took a vow that he would not allow Advani to enter Ayodhya, and indeed, before 30 October, Advani was arrested. This did not prevent Advani's followers from marching to the mosque, but they were stopped by police gunfire. To appreciate Mulayam Singh Yadav's firm stance, backed by V. P. Singh's central government, one has to remember that he is the leader of an upwardly mobile Backward caste which would benefit considerably from implementation of the Mandal Report. Nevertheless, the government's action resulted in its loss of the BJP's support in Parliament and its subsequent fall on 16 November 1990.

Since 1990 the VHP has continued its agitation with a highly effective video and audio cassette campaign on the happenings in Ayodhya on 30 October. It claims that thousands have been killed by the police and that the evidence was suppressed. Martyrs have been cremated, and their bones and ashes taken in ritual pots (*asthi-kalashas*) through the country before immersion in sacred water. In Ayodhya itself a major ritual sacrifice has been sponsored by the VHP, with Vijaye Raje Scindia as the principal sacrificer.

Religious issues, such as the mosque-temple controversy, involve passionate feelings and violent action. A common fallacy is that these passions are "natural" and that the violent struggle is an explosion of pent-up feelings. Passions are certainly involved, but their "naturalness" is produced in a political process. The mosque-temple controversy did not evoke strong feelings between 1949, when the image was installed, and 1984, when the VHP started its agitations. The VHP had been instrumental in homogenizing a "national" Hinduism by transforming the mosque in Ayodhya from a

local shrine into a symbol of a "threatened" Hindu majority. This is not to say that this kind of religious controversy is only a smoke screen behind which we find the "real" clash of material interests of social groups. Nor is it simply a political trick conjured by leaders for their own benefit. Such arguments overlook the importance of religious meaning and practice in the construction of identity. What we have to understand is how certain issues are being promoted as "naturally" crucial to the "self-respect" of a collectivity which is portrayed as a homogeneous whole, as if it were an "individual." If we want to penetrate the very real passions and violence evoked by the mosque-temple controversy, we must see how it is related to fundamental, orienting conceptions of the world and of personhood which are made sacrosanct. This implies that we have to analyze not only ideologies that produce these conceptions, but also the historical context in which they are produced.

The growing significance of the middle class is central to this context. Before the VHP started its campaign, Ayodhya had already been adopted in a scheme to promote indigenous tourism which included building tourist hotels and publishing tourist information available in the many travel offices throughout the country. The nature of pilgrimage has not changed into one of state-sponsored tourism, but it has become important enough that politicians have decided the state should provide for middle-class needs on pilgrimage. In 1985 the state government of Uttar Pradesh embarked on an ambitious and extremely expensive scheme to beautify the waterfront of Ayodhya's sacred river. In the middle of the stream a platform was raised which can be reached from the bank of the river, in imitation of a similar platform in the Ganges at Haridwar and called "Ram's footstep." The Faizabad judge's decision to "unlock" the mosque can clearly be interpreted as a move in the struggle for control over Hindu places of pilgrimage which are increasingly included in middle-class tourist itineraries.

A parallel development has been the success of religious stories in Indian cinema and, more recently, on Indian television. In South India movie actors have for some time acted as leading politicians and set the stage for a cinematic populism with use of religious imagery. This trend is now emerging throughout the rest of the country. Playing a saint or a god in a movie qualifies a person for saintliness or godliness on the stage of political populism, and the public has a clear penchant for the struggle between good and bad on the screen. While in principle this interest could be satisfied with nonreligious themes, the Indian entertainment industry has recently discovered the popularity of dramatized religious tales. Undoubtedly a major event in the history of Indian television was the serial dramatization of the Ramayana, starting in late January 1987. This event made a standardized version of the Ramayana known and popular among the Indian middle class. And indirectly, it enhanced the general television-viewing public's knowledge of Ayodhya as Ram's birthplace and therefore as one of the most important places of pilgrimage in Uttar Pradesh. In this way the controversy concerning the mosque "on Ram's birthplace" has become an issue loaded with affect in popular imagination.

Telecasting the Ram story also subtly changed Ram's iconography from the pose of a detached god (*shanta*) to that of an active warrior (of course for the Hindu cause).²³ The goddess Sita, Ram's wife, clearly takes a secondary place, as exemplified

by the fact that the devotional greeting SitaRam or SiyaRam is no longer allowed in Ayodhya; one must now use Jay SriRam. This is not to say there is nothing militant in the Ram tradition, but that the historical move in the tradition from warrior-asceticism to sweet devotion has received an interesting twist. What we see is an adoption of militant devotionism by a middle-class laity—an adoption supported by media images rather than traditional instruction in beliefs and practices.

Concluding Remarks

In arguing that the VHP can be considered a movement that tries to make modern Hinduism the national religion of India, we must clarify the terms “modern Hinduism,” “national religion,” and “India.” “Modern Hinduism” does not refer to a definite set of authoritative doctrines and practices based on a body of scriptures. The term “Hinduism” as used by the VHP is ambiguous because it is used to create a “Hindu unity” rather than a “unified religion.” That is, the VHP’s project is primarily a nationalist rather than a scripturalist one.

Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that religious nationalism and fundamentalism resemble each other in terms of discourse and practice. The Hinduism of the VHP is a selection of religious features from disparate traditions. The selected features are then employed in a discourse on the continuity of a national religious identity. This is a “modern” Hinduism, because, although it denies the significance of historical discontinuities, it is part of the search for the Indian nation in terms of the nationalism that has been the universally accepted discourse of modernity since the nineteenth century. Moreover, it is “modern” in the sense that it builds on Orientalist understandings of Indian religious traditions, which are themselves part of a discourse of modernity. The term “national religion” implies that the VHP tries to define national identity in terms of religion. This may sound “traditionalist” to those who equate “modern” with “secular” and “tradition” with “religion,” but in fact it is only a variation within the discourse of modernity. In India “secular nationalism” is often portrayed as the enemy of “religious nationalism” (for which the derogatory term “communalism” is used). I suggest, however, that they are strands in the same search for national identity. Nationalism makes “nation” and “national history” into objects of religious worship. In that sense a “secular” nationalism is not less religious than a Hindu or Muslim one.²⁴ The nationalism of Nehru’s Congress derived much of its rhetoric from Gandhi’s construction of “Indian spirituality.” As far as I can see, the main issue here is not “secularism” but Gandhi’s vision of pluralism, over against the VHP’s vision of a “Hindu majority.”

Finally, the term “India” itself is contested, since the VHP has a vision of a “Greater India,” as argued in one pamphlet: “History has witnessed vivesection [*sic*] of India from time to time and with each division part of our motherland has gone away together with number of Hindu sacred places and gems of our culture. Afghanistan was first to go, followed by Burma, Ceylon, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Yet a further division of the motherland is being silently planned by foreign powers and a situation like Lebanon is slowly developing in India.”²⁵

This statement by the VHP shows the extent to which nationalist politics in South Asia has international implications. This was already clear in the case of Partition, which required the breakup of British India into two nation-states, India and Pakistan, to provide a "homeland" for Indian Muslims. This demand for a separate homeland has served as a blueprint for Indian Sikhs to demand their own Khalistan. The VHP answers these separatisms with a counterdemand for the defense of the "integrity" of the Motherland, based on a mixture of colonial realities and Hindu conceptions of sacred space. It effectively establishes a link between internal tensions among Hindus and Muslims and the international relations between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

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Notes

1. For a discussion of this organization, see chapter 22 of this volume, Ainslee Embree, "The Function of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh."

2. Quoted from a VHP publication, *Message and Activities* (New Delhi, 1982).

3. Walter Anderson and S. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987), p. 133.

4. For example in May 1990 a religious leader, the Dwarka Shankaracharya, who is alleged to have ties with the Congress (I) party, started a campaign independent of the VHP because of a disagreement over astrological issues. By seeking an authoritative statement of Brahman scholars on those issues, the VHP contained the damage.

5. See *Message and Activities*.

6. See Robert E. Frykenberg, "The Concept of 'Majority' as a Devilish Force in the Politics of Modern India: A Historiographic Comment," *Journal of Commonwealth His-*

tory and Comparative Politics 25, no. 3 (1987): 267-74.

7. Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).

8. See Robert E. Frykenberg, "The Emergence of Modern 'Hinduism' as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India," in Gunther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989), pp. 67-81.

9. For a thorough discussion of the relation between the Arya Samaj and Hindu nationalism, see Daniel Gold, "Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 531-93.

10. Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 237-60.

11. In an unpublished paper titled, "Cul-

tural Collusion in Ethnography: The Religious Tolerance of Hindus," Richard Burghart argues convincingly that we do not find the direct equivalent for the English term "tolerance" in Hindi/Nepali.

12. For a thorough discussion of Hacker's argument, which is found in a number of articles written between 1957 and 1977, see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 403–18.

13. Quoted in Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 409. Radhakrishnan's distinction between various "religions" and "religion" as the unifying essence of them makes the important move to equate "religion" with Hinduism as the spirit of India. See Robert N. Minor, "Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Hinduism," in Robert Baird, ed., *Religion in Modern India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1989), pp. 421–55.

14. Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Center*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 59 (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

15. Mattison Mines and Vijayalakshmi Gourishankar, "Leadership and Individuality in South Asia: The Case of the South Indian Big-Man," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (1991): 781.

16. *Hindu Vishwa* (Pamphlet, 1980), p. 5.

17. It is unclear how successful the VHP is in regions like Assam, but evidence indicates it has made inroads into the tribal population of Gujarat, leading to a newly developed tension between tribals and Muslims in the area.

18. See *Ekatmata Yajna*, a publication of the VHP.

19. Arjuna's chariot is a recurring symbol in VHP pamphlets, and the story of the Bhagavad Gita, made into the fundamental text of Hinduism in the nineteenth century and later by Gandhi, emphasizes the duty of the warrior to fight when war is inevitable.

20. An important statement has been issued by members of the Center for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi: "The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhumi Dispute," *India Alert-Special Bulletin* 2, no. 3 (December 1983). See also Sushil Srivastava, *The Disputed Mosque: A Historical Inquiry* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1991). The BJP/VHP has published a response to the argument of the JNU historians, by a Belgian author, Koenraad Elst, *Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid: A Case Study in Hindu-Muslim Conflict* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1990). It has also published a study of "Hindu Temples Destroyed and Desecrated and Converted into Mosques," written by a number of important Indian journalists. See Arun Shourie and Jay Dubashi, *Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them: A Preliminary Survey* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1990). An important role in the current debate is played by B. B. Lal, former director general of the Archeological Survey of India and currently director of the archeological survey of the Ramayana sites. He has conducted excavations in Ayodhya and claims to have found evidence in the mosque area of "brick built bases which evidently carried pillars thereon" (see VHP newsletter, *Sri Janmabhoomi*, Special Anniversary Issue 5, nos. 3 and 4 (March and April 1990)).

21. For the local tradition, see van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 19–21.

22. For a description of how this movement was perceived at the local level in Ayodhya, see Peter van der Veer, "God Must Be Liberated! A Hindu Liberation Movement in Ayodhya," *Modern Asian Studies* 21 (1987): 283–303.

23. See Anuradha Kapur, "Militant Images of a Tranquil God," *Times of India*, 10 January 1991.

24. This argument has been recently developed in Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1988), p. 5.

25. Anandshankar Pandya, *Defence of Hindu Society* (Delhi: VHP, n. d.), p. 10.