

# Hindutva Past and Present: From Secular Democracy to Hindu Rashtra

Gita Sahgal\*

\*Correspondence: [secularspaces@gmail.com](mailto:secularspaces@gmail.com)

---

## Abstract

*This essay outlines the beginnings of Hindutva, a political movement aimed at establishing rule by the Hindu majority. It describes the origin myths of Aryan supremacy that Hindutva has developed, alongside the campaign to build a temple on the supposed birthplace of Ram, as well as the re-writing of history. These characteristics suggest that it is a far-right fundamentalist movement, in accordance with the definition of fundamentalism proposed by Feminist Dissent. Finally, it outlines Hindutva's 're-imagining' of secularism and its violent campaigns against those it labels as 'outsiders' to its constructed imaginary of India.*

Keywords: Hindutva, fundamentalism, secularism

---

**Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



© Copyright: The Authors. This article is issued under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike License, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited, the work is not used for commercial purposes and that any derivative works are made available under the same license terms.

Hindutva, the fundamentalist political movement of Hinduism, is also a foundational movement of the 20th century far right. Unlike its European contemporaries in Italy, Spain and Germany, which emerged in the post-first World War period and rapidly ascended to power, Hindutva struggled to gain mass acceptance and was held off by mass democratic movements. The anti-colonial struggle as well as Left, rationalist and feminist movements recognised its dangers and mobilised against it. Their support for anti-fascism abroad and their struggles against British imperialism and against class, caste and gender inequalities at home, helped to forge an independent India in which the classic ideals of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' merged with a commitment towards pluralism and substantive equality. Today, even as Hindutva powers its way to unchallenged

supremacy in the electoral arena at the national level, Indian secularism remains the most powerful ideological force enabling mass resistance to it, as exemplified in the nationwide protests against the exclusionary and discriminatory citizenship laws introduced by the government in late 2019 (see Rai and Alam in this issue).

To explain Hindutva as a fundamentalist movement of the far-right in terms of both its origins in 'classical' fascist movements as well as its importance in the current far-right mobilisation, this essay describes the origins of the movement, including the origin myths it has developed (as all fundamentalist movements must). Its beginning as a form of 'Aryan supremacy' has been salient not only in India and in the global Hindutva diaspora, but has been key to the ideological moorings of neo-Nazi white supremacy and the more recent alt-right attacks on 'cultural Marxists and multiculturalism'. Hindutva also shares many elements with populist movements, with which it is often compared.

In this essay I argue that Hindutva is a coherent ideology whose central aims have been clear from its foundations. It fits the definitions of a fundamentalist movement, developed by the group Women Against Fundamentalism that was formed in the wake of the 'Rushdie affair' and by the journal *Feminist Dissent* (Cowden and Sahgal, 2017). Hindutva is not based on traditional religion but is a modern movement that sets out to use both scriptural and devotional aspects of religion to establish a 'Hindu Rashtra' or Hindu state. Over a century, it has remained remarkably true to its foundational ideal and its core issues have recurred in different forms to move towards its ultimate goal, an authoritarian state ideologically underpinned by fascist nationalism.

Unlike other violent fundamentalist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hindutva organisations have never (except for very brief periods) been banned. They have operated in full view with corporate,

charitable and political status in India, and abroad with a presence in numerous countries. Hindutva is truly a global movement, with allies in the corporate world, in academia, inter-faith and non-governmental fora. It has a huge social media presence and has close links with other far-right national leaders and their parties, and with mainstream parties of government such as both Republicans and Democrats in the US and both Conservative and Labour parties in the UK.

### **The Core Aims of Hindutva**

Violence is foundational to the Hindutva project. Its core aims have been resolutely pursued for a century by a dedicated trans-national movement, incorporating some of the key concerns of nineteenth and early twentieth century Hindu religious revival and reform movements. These include an overwhelming fear of religious conversion that is exemplified in attempts to re-convert people to Hinduism in 'ghar wapsi' (or 'come home' campaigns) and to oppose conversion out of Hinduism. There is an ongoing campaign against 'love jihad' which casts Muslim men as villains deliberately seducing and enticing Hindu women for the purposes of conversion with the goal of overwhelming Hindu society by reproducing at an exponentially faster rate. The control over the minds and bodies of women is central to Hindutva, and these core aims are given effect by the control over marriage and conversion. That these campaigns are summed up as 'love jihad', that is an attack by Muslims, rather than as an attack on Muslim men and Hindu women, is one of the key elements of their world view: that they are defending defenceless Hindu women against a duplicitous enemy. Hindutva thus also involves the policing of endogamy, with regard to both inter-religious marriages and the revival of inter-caste restrictions, as well as the campaign against cow slaughter.

### The Ram Janmabhoomi movement

Central to the meta-narrative which has knit all these disparate strategies together is the Ram Janmabhoomi movement—the campaign to build a temple on the supposed birthplace of the god Ram--thus creating a Mecca for Hinduism and a new ideological basis for the ultimate aim of state power. In his seminal text inventing the term Hindutva, VD Savarkar made hatred of Muslims central to this philosophy, but Hindus also had to emulate their strength. ‘Nothing makes (the) Self conscious of itself so much as a conflict with (the) non-self. Nothing can weld peoples into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe. Hatred separates as well as unites’ (Savarkar, 1923, quoted in Sharma, 2003, p130). The Italian historian Marzia Casolari (2000) has produced extensive evidence of Hindutva’s relations with contemporary Italian fascist and Nazi movements. Since that time, hatred and homogeneity have been core Hindutva objectives.

In 2019, the Supreme Court of India finally made decisions in two separate cases, which ‘settled’ the Ramjanmabhoomi issue with a total victory for the Hindutva forces. A temple would be permitted to be built at the site where a mosque had been razed. All the accused in the case of the demolition of the mosque, who included senior members of the Hindu nationalist BJP and the prominent women campaigners, were acquitted, in spite of the fact that the Court observed that: ‘The destruction of the mosque took place in breach of the order of status quo and an assurance given to this court. The destruction of the mosque and the obliteration of the Islamic structure was an egregious violation of the rule of law.’ On December 6<sup>th</sup> 1992, the Hindutva *kar sevaks* (or devotees who serve by hand and labour) had mobilised precisely under cover of law.

As the Supreme Court tried to grapple with the protection of secularism and freedom of religion, it ‘acquitted the term Hindutva from its religious

underpinnings by giving it a broader interpretation and holding it synonymous with Indianisation in three judgments which came to be known as the Hindutva cases. The court accepted the definition of Hindutva to mean a 'way of life' rather than 'religion', making the term immune from scrutiny under the Representation of People's Act, 1951, which deemed the use of religion in elections as a 'corrupt practice'. This granted the Hindu nationalists the foothold in the legal realm that they so keenly desired, thus ushering in a new dawn of Hindutva' (Saxena, 2018).

Atal Behari Vajpayee, who is considered a more 'moderate' BJP Prime Minister, as leader of the Party had rallied his people with the confidence of the court judgements that had allowed prayers but had as yet not allowed the construction to go ahead. With the stamp of court authority, Vajpayee declared that the ground would have to be evened out of stones for religious ceremonies to take place. The next day, on December 6, 1992, a huge crowd, armed with sticks and stones, brought down the ancient structure urged on by Sadhvi Rithambara and other Hindutva leaders.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid led to country-wide riots and mass rapes. It also caused the brief dismissal of three BJP state governments because of their RSS (the ideological arm of the Hindutva parties) leadership's involvement in the violence. This was only the third time since independence that the RSS had been banned. But they won two great prizes--the destruction of the mosque building, and the recognition of Hindutva as embedded in the idea of India. At the moment of greatest division, they could also make a claim to universality. Mohan Bhagwat, an incendiary BJP leader, further claimed that everyone who lives in India is Hindu by identity, nationality. Thus, the very language to which Hindutva was opposed for decades (that is, secularism) was handed over by the courts to the Hindu nationalists to appropriate.

'As Congress demanded Britain, "Quit India", Savarkar offered the Empire his co-operation though he had, in 1939, enthusiastically welcomed the 'Aryan' Nazi regime (Casolari, 2000). Savarkar demanded that Hindus remake themselves against a much nearer enemy. In 1940, Savarkar had called all Hindus to get themselves re-animated and re-born into a martial race. Manu and Sri Krishna, he argued, are our law givers and Shri Rama the Commander of our forces. But previous iterations of the Ramjanmabhoomi (birthplace of Rama) movement had been marginal, with nothing to indicate that it was anything but a little local difficulty, a headache to local administrators and the courts. For in 1909, some members of the Gorakhpur Mat – the religious order to which the current chief minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh Swami Adityanath belongs - placed an idol of Ram Lalla or baby Ram inside a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque known as Babri Masjid. A rumour spread that this was a divine manifestation. For decades, the case wound through the courts with, at various times, the doors of the mosque locked, or compromises allowing both religions to worship in different sites. But the idea of an alternative religious reality soon gained ground that saw Ram as on the top of the pantheon of historic heroes and his actual birthplace sullied by a Muslim monument. The honour of Hindus was to be restored with the mosque being destroyed and a temple built in its place.

The Ramjanmabhoomi movement grew into the metanarrative of contemporary Hindutva. From small beginnings, it became a transnational movement, a massive source of fundraising and newly awakened martial religiosity. Previously there had been many diverse projects of Hindutva and this movement brought them all together. Recruitment to the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and its women's wing brought the modern fundamentalist foot soldiers (*karsevaks*), including Dalits RSS members like Bhanwar Meghwanshi and their 'teachers' (*pracharaks*) of the RSS, none of whom are religious leaders, into common cause through the VHP or World Hindu Council, with the formidable, enormously wealthy

institutions of traditional Hinduism – the temple trusts with their powerful priests and monastic orders such as the Gorakhpur Mat. It joined them in a common endeavor, a major step to the creation of a Hindu state through the religious project of remaking Hinduism and providing it with a central focus.

The movement was, of course, an electoral tool as well. It helped overcome the stigma of having engineered the killing of Gandhi and proved once again that Hindutva was not simply one movement among others. It was not simply a version of the European Christian democrats – a conservative party with a religious ethic in a deeply religious country. The Ramjanmabhoomi movement created a grand narrative – mythifying history and historicizing myth. To do this the figure of Ram had to descend from myth to history and the legend of his birth had to be celebrated at a particular site where a mosque had been built. Sudarshan, Assistant General Secretary of the RSS, described the supposed catholicity of the Hindutva movement in terms of many flowers, one garland, many rivers, one ocean. At the same time, he argued that the country can only have one Hindu culture. So, all must accept Ram as the nation's hero. In this he was adapting a plural ideal to assert the majoritarian character of the Hindutva movement focussed on a single goal.

### **The 'Sangh Parivar' or the Family of Organisations**

But if the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign owed its origins to Hindu revivalism, modern Hindutva has had to be attentive to the challenge of rationalist, feminist and anti-caste movements and electoral politics, and has had to develop multiple organisational forms and campaigning strategies to engage and recruit its cadres across classes and castes, and indeed religions.

The number of Hindutva related organisations is so huge that it is only possible to sketch some of them, giving a sense of the core organisations and mentioning some of those that appear in this essay. All of them share a common ideology and a commitment to core goals, but are constituted by separate organisational structures with overlapping membership. This vast ecosystem of local, national and international organisations, registered charities, activist groups, think tanks, and a political party has proved remarkably successful at maintaining Hindutva's core goals while pursuing different strategies to achieve them, presenting themselves as more or less strident at different times. Their fundraising supports political, charitable and religious goals, the charitable activities provide trained activists for religious campaigns such as Ram Janmabhoomi, and love jihad and they all strive towards electoral success. Finally, their propaganda which started with pamphlets and has moved with the times to cyberspace has an extensive network of official trolls with a wider ecosystem of supporters (Chaturvedi, 2016). Here are the names of the main constituents of the Hindutva family:

The Hindu Mahasabha was born in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century via anti-cow slaughter campaigns. It was one of the incubators of the Hindutva movement and was led during the 1930s and 40s by VD Savarkar who invented the fundamentalist political ideology of Hindu nationalism known as Hindutva. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the RSS), meaning National Self-help Organisation, is one of the largest voluntary movements in the world, a male paramilitary Hindu nationalist organisation which trains men from youth to old age who are full time workers known as "Pracharaks". It also has unpaid volunteers and adherents. It is the operational, strategic and intellectual heart of the Hindutva movement, exercising remarkable control over its many related organisations that are presented as autonomous. Organised in neighbourhood groups called *shakhas* (branches) which meet regularly ( in some places daily, abroad it is often weekly), the RSS provides physical training and history lessons



which promote their idea of India and Hinduism, with a lessons in discipline, family and anti-Muslim hatred.

The Rashtriya Sevika Sangh meaning National Women's Service Organisation is the women's wing of the RSS as the RSS itself does not admit women. Women have been crucial to the creation of an anti-Muslim consensus and many of Hindutva's most prominent activists were women mobilisers of the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign.

Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) or 'Hindu Self-help Union' is the name of RSS branches abroad which have been established in about 40 countries. A television documentary on 'Hate Charities' which filmed a neo-Nazi, a Jihadi and an HSS charity showed that their teaching on Gandhi's murder whitewashes the role of the RSS and teaches children to propagate their views.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or the World Hindu Assembly was established to create an organisation for traditional Hindu religious leaders which would also sign up to Hindutva goals and promote them in India and abroad. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or Indian Peoples Party, is the ruling party of India at present and is the political arm of the Hindutva movement. Narendra Modi and other senior leaders of the BJP had worked full time in the RSS before moving to political careers. Hindu Yuva Vahini is the Hindu Youth Assembly founded in Gorakhpur by Swami Adityanath, now the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP).

### **The invention of Hindutva**

Hindutva, as noted before, has its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the various social reform, traditionalist and revivalist movements fought for space. The Arya Samaj, a 19<sup>th</sup> century religious revivalist movement was occupied with returning Hinduism to its ancient Vedic roots. It was also

concerned about possible conversions to Islam and launched the 'shuddhi' or purification movement with the purpose of trying to ensure that oppressed castes did not convert out of Hinduism, and if they did, they could be 'purified' and re-enter the Hindu fold. It was also a movement to preserve caste, another key preoccupation of modern Hindutva.

The term 'Hindutva' was invented nearly a century ago in 1923 by VD Savarkar, who was imprisoned by the British (Bhatt, 1997). His social and political ideology was aimed at radically re-conceptualising Hinduism and establishing a Hindu state. Savarkar himself was an atheist who inspired violence notably the assassination of Gandhi (Gandhi, 2009). From his prison cell in the Andamans, he invented a new philosophy quite distinct from traditional Hinduism, calling it Hindutva. He argued that Muslims and Christians might be born of Indian blood, but they could never really belong to the country because their Holy lands were outside India in Arabia and Palestine. Internally, Hindutva could afford to be quite catholic--Sikhs, Jains, atheists, reformers and traditionalists--could all belong. Basu et al (1993) suggest that Savarkar soars above sectarian and ritual differences within Hindutva. Sarvarkar argued that Hindus are not merely citizens of the Indian state because they are united by the bonds of love they bear to a common motherland, but also by the bonds of a common blood.

Chetan Bhatt (1997) notes that this mystical and spiritual *volkische* between the blood of the race and the passion of the race is an extremely important trope in contemporary Hindu nationalist activism and its political languages. It embeds a sensuousness and pathos about belonging which emphasizes its 'Romanticism' (Bhatt, 1997). Common blood could apply to Muslims too. But if the Motherland and Fatherland also became the Holy land, Muslims (and Christians) could never belong because their Holyland was in far off Arabia or Palestine. Thus, they cannot be incorporated into an Indian Holy land unless they give up outside allegiances which would mean converting back to their essential nature. In

this way, Hindutva fulfilled the criteria of ethnic nationalism as it has developed in Europe. Its motto 'Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan' echoed many other European nationalisms based on religious identity, a common language, or even racial feeling and land, quite unlike the plural nationalism promoted by Gandhi and Nehru and the anti-caste movements against Hinduism, exemplified by Ambedkar (Jaffrelot, 1996, 2020).

### **New Myth of Origin**

To strengthen this view of nationality that merged race, religion and caste, Hindutva had to strengthen a claim to Hinduism's origin as entirely indigenous. Myths of origin are crucial to religious fundamentalist movements, playing a central role in constructing a world view of the inerrant nature of the religion and the literal truth of its texts or its 'fundamentals'. Like creationists, ideologues of political Hinduism or Hindu fundamentalism known as Hindutva, have a central myth of origin. It is not so much about the creation of the world (as creation theory, believed to be the literal truth of the Bible story of creation or intelligent design as its pseudo-science version is known) as the creation of a race which formed the basis of national identity. The Hindutva myth of origin is based on the idea of 'the Aryan' as the foundational 'race' of modern Hindutva ideology, and the Vedic age – that is of the Rig Veda – the earliest Aryan text as ushering in the Utopia that modern Hinduism must recover in order to establish a Hindu state.

As a result, historical research that points to early Indian peoples and civilisations as being composed of a number of migrations from Africa and that the group known as the Aryans came much later from central Asia, is now deeply controversial, and indeed considered heretical. The historian Romila Thapar points to the ways in which historical questions regarding Aryan identities are now enmeshed in a variety of cultural politics (Thapar,

2014). Today, there is a concerted effort to deny mounting archeological, linguistic and genetic evidence about early Indians (Thapar et al., 2019). This evidence amounts to a scholarly consensus which has overturned an earlier hypothesis of the colonial era that Aryans invaded India, a proposition that Savarkar accepted. The invasion theory has been replaced by a gradual migration theory which demonstrates that Aryans – who are a linguistic, not a racial group--gradually arrived in India after the flowering of the large urban civilization known as the Indus Valley civilization, referred to by Hindutva groups as ‘the Saraswati civilisation’. The increasing focus on indigeneity and race theory has meant that the official Hindutva view now insists that Aryans were the original Indians – indeed the original Hindus (Joseph, 2018).

In 2017, a committee of the Archeological Survey of India was convened to ‘use evidence such as archaeological finds and DNA to prove that today's Hindus are directly descended from the land's first inhabitants many thousands of years ago, and make the case that ancient Hindu scriptures are fact, not myth.’ (Thapar, et al. 2019). The discovery that bones about 4,500 years old are not ‘Aryan’ but an older indigenous group was seen as a political problem that had to be handled with great delicacy, even censorship.

But already by 1939, Golwalkar, the leader or ‘Guru’ of the RSS had asserted that Hindus ‘came into this land from nowhere but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial and natural masters of the country. Here we compiled our inimitable Vedas, reasoned out our Philosophy of the Absolute – the last word on the subject, built our sciences and arts and crafts. Here we progressed in cultivation, industries and trade, flourished and prospered – a great nation of a great race – propounded the one religion, which is no make belief but religion in essence (1939, 64. See Agrawal 1994 and Bal 2017).

### **The Sacred Mother and rape as parodharmah – the greatest duty**

Savarkar describes India's history as a long, painful battle against Muslims that nevertheless invigorated and created the nation. If Hindutva was founded by the 'race' of the Aryans, Mother India needed to be defended from invasion. He wrote: 'At last she was rudely awakened on the day when Mohammed of Ghazni cursed the Indus, the frontier line of Sindhustan, and invaded her. That day the conflict of life and death began (see Sharma, 2003).

The sacred image of Mother India, one that was embedded in the nationalist discourse, became an ideal to worship. In schools run by the RSS, children pray to Mother India, often depicted as a woman in a saffron sari against the backdrop of a map of India. But extremely violent and bloody images of Mother India being raped or beheaded are used as a call to arms for Hindutva masculinity (see Bhatt 1997). A feminist human rights investigation into the Gujarat massacre and sexual violence of 2002 reported that students were asked to celebrate independence day as the day their mother was ripped asunder, in a reference to the violence of Partition (IJ, 2003).

Towards the end of his life in 1963, Savarkar wrote a book called 'Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History', a tract which references several eras of Indian history in which Hindus heroically resisted invaders. The work, a 'history', is in fact a form of mythmaking – seeing all of India's complex history as a single struggle – for Hindu liberation and self-realisation. It is also a discussion of what constitutes virtue and here Savarkar makes an ethical argument to propound a new form of Hindu 'virtue' which turns many Hindu ideas on their head. He decries caste as a tool that had shackled Hindu society. At the same time, its worst aspect was that Muslims were able to make use of caste restrictions to forcibly carry off

and keep Hindu women and thereby increase the population of Muslims. (Agrawal, 1995 and Ashraf, 2016).

Hindus were shackled, however, not only by caste but by their gentlemanly ethics. For Savarkar, the god Ram was not heroic enough. He ought to have drawn more lessons from his arch enemy, the demon king Ravana, who had abducted his wife Sita. If Ram's epic war was intimately familiar to vast numbers of Indians, his tortured and human qualities transmitted through the poetry of the great epic Ramayana's many versions was the reason that many Indians knew and loved him (Agrawal, 1994). For many north Indians the common greeting 'Ram Ram' is a peace greeting. Hindutva was to transform this into 'Jai Shree Ram' – Victory to Lord Ram, a battle cry for Hindus and a demand imposed on Muslims – that they utter it to submit.

Savarkar denounces the chivalric tradition in both history and myth, by insisting that only Hindus adhered to it, while Muslim men not only kidnapped and raped Hindu women, but that Muslim women helped them do it. Shivaji, a Maratha ruler who fought the Mughals and has been turned into a Hindutva hero (though he had a cross-caste and multi-religious court and official retinue) is denounced for chivalrously sending an aristocratic captured woman back to her family. Instead, Savarkar asks, what if Hindu kings, who occasionally defeated their Muslim counterparts, had also raped their women and discusses the 'wild tribes' who kill their male enemy but distribute their women.

Savarkar turns history's failures into myth by drawing on the story of the *Ramayana*. Here again, he mobilises his idea of ethical conduct from the enemy of his hero Ram. When Sita was kidnapped, some of the advisors of Ravana, the demon king who had carried her away, suggested he return her to her husband, Ram, because they had committed an irreligious act. Savarkar quotes Ravana saying, 'What? To abduct and rape the womenfolk

of the enemy, do you call it irreligious? It is *Parodharmah*, the greatest duty!' Through such instances, Savarkar constructs an ethics of shifting virtues, where the conduct of enemies is to be emulated while heroes are found wanting. Jaffrelot refers to this double process of admiring 'strength' while despising the 'enemy other' as a process of 'stigmatising and emulating' (Jaffrelot, 1996). In his speech in 1940, Savarkar had referred to the need for 'manliness' in the movement. Although he admitted there was a parallel tradition of forgiveness and non-aggression, one which Gandhi had fashioned into 'Ahimsa' or non-violence, this tradition was one to be despised.

One of the primary roles of Hindutva women was to repeat these stories to their children, at family and women's gatherings and to develop an embrace of the idea that rape was good and that Muslim women's supposed complicity and involvement in the rape of Hindu women down the ages justified, indeed necessitated, their rape in the present time. Purushottan Agrawal, a former RSS member turned secular advocate, who first analysed Savarkar's views on rape wrote, 'rape becomes an explicitly political act, and in the context of organised aggression it becomes a spectacular ritual, a ritual of victory; a defilement of the autonomous symbol of honour of the enemy community' (Agrawal, 1995, p.31).

The feminist historian Tanika Sarkar found that Hindutva woman would repeat the argument that 'Muslim women deserved rape' because of their purported complicity against Hindu women. Sarkar also points to the constant repetition of the demography argument--Muslims breed at four times the rate of Hindus and are polygamous-- made with the help of census records among Hindutva followers. This view in Hindutva circles had been completely normalised, through repetitive story-telling, or what, citing research on the Ku Klux Klan, Sarkar calls 'poisoned whispers' that allowed for these fantasies to become common sense (1993 in Basu et al, 2015).

One of the signature campaigns of the virulent Swami Adityanath of the Gorakhpur *mat* (religious order), who became the Chief Minister of the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh in 2017, was against Hindu women 'being taken' by Muslim men. His aggressive calls included threats that if they (the Muslims) capture one Hindu girl, then 'we will bring back at least 100 Muslim girls', ensuring that the Hindu response will be a 'hundred times worse' than their acts (Jha and Prasad, 2020). But it was not separate co-existence that he was arguing for. As organiser of the *Hindu Virat Chetna* or Awakening Hindu Consciousness rally, before his elevation to the Chief Ministership he said, 'We are all preparing for a religious war. Only this religious war can fight Jihad. People say, "What was the point of creating the *Hindu Vahini*" ('Hindu Army')? For Adityanath, Hinduism is a distinctly different culture from Islam and the two cannot coexist or live together in harmony. A collision between the two is thus inevitable as is the division of the country along religious lines. 'Brothers', Adityanath announced, 'the *Virat Hindu Chetna* rally is...about more than just awakening the Hindu consciousness... It is also a rally to warn Hindus.' On this view, to save the country it was necessary to 'create this kind of emotion inside this country, create conditions to organise Hindus'. It involves taking steps 'that will bring together different strands of the Hindu society into one thread'. What was key was a stance of hostility and violence: 'Aggressively do things that will execute our vision. That is why we created the *Hindu Vahini*'. Adityanath's rise to power symbolises the incorporation of Hindu institutional power into the rubric of government and marks a new turning point in the history of Hindutva.

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement had also showcased new constituencies of activism within Hindutva. Most prominent among these were women. Sadhvi (feminine of Sadhu) Rithambhara and Uma Bharti were among the most famous. '*Rithambhara's voice circulates with the ubiquity of a one-rupee coin in north India. She many speeches urging war against Muslims and these were recorded on cassettes. In the process she*



*has become the first mass leader in the country to be created by a recorded cassette. But more than drumming up support for particular movements, the cassettes with her speeches have generalised and intensified communal attitudes to the point that they have become the meaning of existence for many, making her one of the best known and most popular leaders in the country'* (Basu et al 1996).

Interviewing women RSS activists in the '90s, Sarkar, who has tracked Hindutva women since the '80s, found that they were excited by the victories that they had had as full participants in the movement and against the wishes of the male leaders. From seeing them as purely domestic subjects – though playing a very important role in the transmission of ideas through stories--they had taken their place as violent participants in the movement. The establishment of a *Durga Vahini* (Durga's Army) with Sadhvi Rithambara as a founding member, named after the selective rendering of the aggressive image of the Goddess Durga, and the VHP's adoption of a more aggressive style of woman leader, signaled their full participation in the project of rebuilding Hindu pride through hyper-masculinity.

### **Making Others the Enemy**

The 'ghar wapsi' programme, that is the 'return home' programme, was formulated to invite Muslims and Christians to give up their alien religions and return to their origins. In spite of a few spectacular meetings conducted by the VHP, this programme faltered. Farhana Ibrahim (2012) describes the 'conversion' of groups in Kacchh as 'new Hindus' in the wake of the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat. Hindutva groups pursuing their conversion agendas, converged on the area. Hindutva charities built an entire village grouped round a Ram temple, with houses given names from the Ramayana. But the villagers (whose traditional customs contained both Hindu and Muslim practices) continued to live largely in their old

villages. Andersen and Damle (1987), who have written two sympathetic insider accounts of the RSS, have suggested that it was difficult to know where to place new converts in a caste hierarchy. Meanwhile the beneficiaries of 'conversion' were more concerned about losing their reserved status as a 'scheduled caste.' Conversion, then, does not seem to be either a successful or a stable strategy.

'Ghar wapsi' or 'return home' programmes have convinced some observers that the Hindutva movement is not fascist since it gives people a chance to join rather than exterminating them. But the Hindutva movement bears the hallmarks of a far-right movement as well as a fundamentalist one. Fundamentalist movements have a majoritarian universalism--they do not see themselves as simply existing as one movement among many. That is why Islamists refer to new Muslims as 'reverts', since they have become Muslim again, rather than 'converting' to Islam. Many Muslim fundamentalists also offer the chance to revert, rather than being killed. This ideology informed the work of Taliban in Afghanistan and ISIS with the Yazidis and plays into the purity of Islam perspective (see Corbin, 2019). The 'ghar wapsi' programme mirrors both the promise and threat of the invitation to 'revert'.

### **Anti-cow slaughter campaign**

Another means by which the goals of promoting Hindutva are being intensified is via the anti-cow slaughter campaign, even as India's cows wander the streets of towns, painfully thin and feeding on plastic waste. 'Cow protection' has been a mobilising issue for Hindu revivalist movements and the Hindu right since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was supported by many including Gandhi, though he warned against violence in its name. In the 1950s violent protests demanding anti-cow slaughter laws engulfed India's Parliament. The issue has been brought to the centre of politics since Modi came to power in 2014, and a recent *Caravan* investigation

titled 'In the Name of the Mother' describes the build-up of entire militias devoted to cow protection. This included giving them government grants (Marvel, 2016).

These militias began systematically terrorising Muslims and 'low caste' people for transporting cattle or being suspected of eating beef. In a notorious case, a man called Pehlu Khan was lynched because he was transporting cattle. He identified his attackers, and they in fact confessed on camera. But not only were they acquitted in court, they were treated as heroes and garlanded by ministers. In another case, a teenager, Junaid, who had gone to Delhi to shop for Eid festivities, was beaten up and set upon by passengers in a train when he began to eat and was accused of eating beef (for a detailed description see Mander, 2018).

In 2017, 11 deaths and 37 hate incidents related to cows were recorded. Many of these were either instigated through WhatsApp messages spreading rumours about cow killing going on in a neighbourhood (or sometimes another issue like the abduction of children). Some of these attacks were directed at Dalits rather than Muslims. One of the breaking points for Bhanwar Meghwanshi, the Dalit RSS activist, was the way a VHP leader justified the fact that Dalits had been burnt alive in Haryana on the suspicion of cow slaughter. Acharya Giriraj Kishore, a BJP leader had said, 'the life of one cow is more valuable than the lives of five Dalits.' There was a dip in cattle exports at the height of these murders, although India today remains one of the largest exporters of cattle in the world, second only to Brazil, and four of the six largest exporters are Hindu owned businesses (see Dhingra, 2019).

One of the men responsible for ending many cruel practices towards animals was Narendra Dabholkar, who had worked for years organising a grass roots rationalist movement against religion and religious superstition. He campaigned successfully, and peacefully against animal

sacrifice in religious ritual as a needlessly cruel custom. He was killed by unknown assailants in 2013. His murder was followed by that of Gobind Pansare, a communist who had denounced Dabholkar's murder, and then came the murder of the scholar M.M. Kalburgi. Gauri Lankesh, a journalist, was assassinated, in 2017 (SAHMAT, 2018). These four murders have remained unsolved, but a police investigation found that the murders of four prominent rationalists were related, and that people involved in cow protection movements had been groomed to hate by watching videos, in ways that are familiar to other extremists. These allegations by national police forces of a wide-ranging conspiracy (Johnson, 2019) brought together the targeted assassinations of known individuals with the lynching by mobs of unknown people. As with the grooming of Dalits and Adivasis for violence in organised pogroms, the 'cow protection' campaigns have spawned not only violence related to cows, which has heavy caste as well as religious overtones, they also demonstrate how grooming in one campaign is used to spread to violence in another.

If there was a lesson to be learnt from the major genocidal pogrom in Gujarat 2002 in which over 2,000 Muslims were killed, it was that violence wins elections and creates national leaders like Modi who was chosen to lead the BJP because his record enhanced his charismatic appeal. After the Gujarat violence he had been denied entry to the US and other countries because of campaigning by secular Indians and Christian lobbies. This may be one of the reasons, that, with some exceptions, most of the murders described above could be attributed to a 'vigilante public' (Banaji, 2018), and not directly to the major Hindutva organisations. Modi, a vigorous tweeter, remains silent as violent lynchings occur, while following people who promote the perpetrators as heroes.

## Controlling Marriage

The policing of marriage is not a new phenomenon, nor is it confined to Hindutva. Caste relations have been so ruthlessly policed for thousands of years, many scientists describe the Indian population as a number of different populations rather than one, as we saw in the section on the myth of the Aryans by migrants from different countries. But this mingling of different populations came to a halt as the caste system hardened around 1500 years ago (Joseph, 2018). As David Reich explains, in contrast to the Han Chinese who have been mixing freely for thousands of years, 'there are few if any Indian groups that are demographically very large, and the degree of genetic differentiation among Indian *jati* (sub-caste) groups living side by side is typically two or three times higher than the genetic differentiation between northern and southern Europeans. The truth is that India is composed of a large number of small populations (quoted in Joseph, 2018).

Caste councils or panchayats have given orders for couples of different caste origins to be killed because they broke caste taboos. But the Hindutva movement has a particular obsession with the fear that Hindu women will find Muslim men attractive and marry them. This they have deemed to be 'love jihad' – the devious desire of Muslim men to marry Hindu women and convert them. It is the strictness of caste enforcement that has led feminists to campaign for the right to marry and against 'crimes in the name of honour'. As Yashica Dutt (2019), a Dalit feminist writer, notes, endogamy is the foot soldier of caste and patriarchy. It is the *jati* system that ensures that when people choose to convert to another religion, they never really escape caste because they maintain the *jati* system in respect of marriage and other customs.

*Khap Panchayats* or Caste Councils are especially active in North India, but as various studies show, like the Hindutva movement they are not simply

a village tradition. Instead, their current practices include policing women's marriages – both to 'outsiders' such as Dalit men or to other 'insiders' like Jats. The acute shortage of women caused by sex selection has produced skewed sex ratios. Women are being more heavily policed as the availability of Jat women to marry into other Jat families is severely limited. So, while 'local women are threatened if they marry 'out' and even marriages approved by their families are threatened, women from all over India are trafficked into villages to be sold into marriage (Kaur, 2010).

### **Family Laws and the struggle of Muslim women for equality**

All family laws, also known as personal laws, are governed by religion. During debates at the Constituent Assembly, the great lawyer and Dalit advocate Dr Ambedkar had called for religious influence to be controlled. He had asked: 'What are we having this freedom for if we give religion an expansive space in the constitution?... We are having this liberty in order to reform our social system, which is so full of inequities, discriminations and other things, which conflict with our fundamental rights' (1948). Ironically, the BJP has used the call for a common civil code which remained in the preamble to the Constitution but unrealised in law as a demand to prove that they are more secular than the Congress which was said to be appeasing Muslims. This call disabled secular and feminist groups from embracing this demand and fierce arguments about the right way to reform law, or whether groups, particularly Muslims, were indeed better off with 'kazi' law, have dominated the discourse.

But an examination of the Special Marriages Act and its very systematic undermining by the RSS gives some idea of what they think of the rights embedded in secular law rather than the uniformity promised by a common civil code. The Special Marriage Act, Act 111 of 1954 allows couples to marry in a civil court and to marry across caste and religion. In her book on the workings of this Act that was updated in 1954, Moody says

‘secular law as a refuge’ remains an indispensable factor in maintaining a democracy in India’. But she also points out that that the law has always been contested, since a version of it was first discussed in the 1860s. She writes of how the ‘native community’ was outraged, and this outrage has not yet abated. She points out that ‘what began as a debate about the rights of communities to detach renegade members is now about the individual’s right to repulse the incursions of politicised communities into the civil machinery of the state’ (Moody, 2008).

The courts then are not a safe space. VHP cells operate in the courts, checking the lists for inter-religious marriages. In Delhi, one woman describes Hindutva activists contacting her parents and putting pressure on them by asking whether they were ashamed that a Brahmin was marrying a Muslim and spreading lies about her fiancé. In Gujarat the BJP government issued a circular demanding parental consent. Under both the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 and the Special Marriage Act 1956, parental consent is not required. Under pressure from the VHP, the Gujarat government made the prior consent of the District Magistrate (a civil servant) mandatory before a marriage under the Act could take place. Even more seriously, there were allegations that Babu Bajrangi who was jailed after the Gujarat massacre in Naroda Patiya was implicated in kidnapping women who had married outside their caste and communities, returning them and arranging suitable Hindu husbands for them. Hindutva activists also regularly attack Dalit marriage processions (Setalvad, 2020).

Rather than the serious but smaller scale activist ‘cells’ of the VHP, and the vigilante actions of small Hindutva groups across India, the policing of inter-religious marriages has been passed to the police, while it is also the subject of feverish law making in several states. Reports from several states under BJP rule report that couples are harassed by the police, while adult women may be forced into detention in ‘women’s shelters’, their parents informed and many obstacles put in the path of their marriage.

Two states, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh already have anti-conversion laws which specifically reference marriage. Uttar Pradesh has passed an ordinance on the subject (Ganesan, 2020). From vigilante harassment, to police and administrative interference, the law is rapidly criminalising inter-faith relationships under the guise of protection from inducement or forced conversion (Bhandare and Karwa, 2020).

In contrast to the push of the government, the Allahabad High Court in the same state governed by Yogi Adityanath, has issued a series of progressive judgements upholding constitutional principles. Giving relief to several couples, including Priyanka Kharwar and Salamat, demanding protection for their inter-faith marriages, the Court observed: 'We do not see Priyanka Kharwar and Salamat (the petitioners) as Hindu and Muslim, rather as two grownup individuals who out of their own free will and choice are living together peacefully and happily over a year. The courts and constitutional courts, in particular, are enjoined to uphold life and liberty of an individual guaranteed under Article 21 of Constitution.'

### **Conclusion: Laying Claim to Universalism and Democracy**

Today, Hindutva holds almost unchecked power and is well on its way to destroying secularism as a constitutional ideal as well as popular, community-based plural and secular spaces. With the laying of a foundation stone for the building of a temple to Ram in the north Indian city of Ayodhya, a hundred year project has come to fruition. In the course of the second term of the Modi government, the core purpose of creating a Hindu state as an authoritarian, far-right, and fundamentalist project has been greatly accelerated. Through the electoral process the political party, BJP which represents the wider Hindutva movement, has developed alliances with different groups which have enabled it to move beyond the Hindi speaking 'cow belt' of Northern India and to emerge as a truly national party. But even in the second term of Narendra Modi's Prime



Ministership and his party the BJP's majority rule, his personal heroes- those that loom large in the firmament of Hindutva- are still not national heroes. When the nation has to be showcased for international consumption, it is the symbols of plural, secular, India which must be paid formal respect. When Trump visited India for a rally with Modi as Covid loomed in January 2020, he was taken to visit Gandhi's ashram, by the man who reveres Gandhi's murderers, and toured the Taj Mahal in a state now ruled by 'Swami Adityanath' who had cut his political teeth on his violent opposition to all things Muslim, including India's most famous monument.

Nathruam Godse, who shot Gandhi and VD Savarkar who invented Hindutva, and was also indicted in the conspiracy to murder Gandhi, are the true heroes of the Hindutva movement. When the BJP came to power in 2014, there were demands for statues of Godse to be erected around the country. In an earlier BJP administration, Savarkar's portrait was hung in Parliament and hangs among India's great founding heroes, in spite of the fact that he had no great impact in the national movement and abhorred everything that the Indian republic stands for. On Savarkar's birth anniversary PM Modi tweeted photographs of himself standing reverently before Savarkar's photograph (Modi, 2019).

Significant among the strategies Hindutva has employed is the simultaneous attack on the leaders of the freedom struggle, principally Nehru, and his descendants in the Congress party, while attempting to wear the mantle of conservative, Hindu Congressmen such as Sardar Patel, on the one hand; and Dr Ambedkar, the great Dalit Constitutionalist on the other. Dr Ambedkar, who argued that caste should be annihilated, and lead a movement of Dalits to leave Hinduism and embrace Buddhism, is an odd hero for the Hindutva movement, as is the gigantic statue commemorating Sardar Patel, the first Home Minister of India, the man who identified the Hindutva forces as fascist and banned them following the murder of Gandhi.

Indeed, as part of the process of colonising and dismantling the secular ethos of the country, the BJP has introduced a Constitution Day. Modi has tweeted a photograph of himself in 2010, when as Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, he honoured the Constitution by parading it on an elephant, bejeweled and decked in saffron (a colour associated with Hinduism), as if it was a religious icon (Modi, 2020). In the photograph, Modi walks beside the elephant, standing out from the soberly dressed crowd in a mustard kurta and white waistcoat with a scarf bearing the tri-colour of the republic. This is a flag which was designed to celebrate the multiplicity of peoples of modern India and the qualities of peace, non-violence, strength and fertility of the land as well as referencing Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Hindutva's success is not simply due to the failures of the secular parties, but to its colonising of a radical universalist ideal embedded in Indian nationalism which had propelled opposition to imperialism abroad and a commitment to an egalitarian polity at home. For Hindutva's success to be maintained and deepened, this story of independent India has to be paid obeisance to, at the same time as its secular ethos is being dismantled through violence, intimidation on the streets, in cyber space and through political maneuver.

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to Alison Assiter for her help with editing this essay.

**Gita Sahgal** is a writer, documentary filmmaker, journalist and political activist who has focused on issues of feminism, fundamentalism and human rights. She was a co-founder of Southall Black Sisters and a founder member of the group Women against Fundamentalism. She was Head of Gender at Amnesty International until she was suspended for speaking out about its close association with Moazzem Begg. She set up the Centre for Secular Space and she is an active member of the editorial board of *Feminist Dissent*. She co-edited, with Nira Yuval-Davis, *Refusing Holy*

*Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain* and she has written a number of book chapters and opinion pieces in *openDemocracy*.

## References

Agrawal, P. (1994) "'Kan Kan Mein Vyape Hein Ram": The Slogan as a Metaphor of Cultural Interrogation', *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2, 1994, 245–264.

Agarwal, P. (1995) 'Savarkar, Surat and Draupadi, Legitimising Rape as a Political Weapon', in T. Sarkar and U. Butalia, eds. *Women and Right Wing Movements: Indian Experiences*. London: Zed Books, 29–57.

Anderson, W and Damle, S. (1987) *The Brotherhood in Saffron. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.

Ashraf, A. (2016) 'Reading Savarkar: How a Hindutva icon justified the idea of rape as a political tool', *scroll.in*, May 28.

Bal, H S. (2017) 'The Instigator: How M S Golwalkar's virulent ideology underpins Modi's India', *The Caravan*, July 1.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/golwalkar-ideology-underpins-modi-india>

Banaji, Shakuntala (2018) 'Vigilante publics: orientalism, modernity and Hindutva fascism in India', *Javnost--The Public*, Vol. 25, Iss. 4, 334–350.

Basu, T. et al. (1993) *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*. Orient BlackSwan.

Bhandare, N. and Karwa, S. (2020) 'How the Special Marriage Act is killing love', *Article 14* <https://www.article-14.com/post/how-the-special-marriage-act-is-killing-love>

Bhatt, Chetan (1997) *Liberation And Purity: Race, new Religious Movements and The Ethics Of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.

Casolari, M. (2000) 'Hindutva's Foreign Tie-Up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 218–228.

Chaturvedi, S. (2016) *I am a Troll: inside the secret world of the BJP's digital army*. Juggernaut Books.

Corbin, C. 'A Convert or a Revert? How Does it Matter?', June 22. <https://aboutislam.net/reading-islam/living-islam/convert-or-revert-how-does-it-matter/>

Cowden, S and Sahgal G. (2017) Why Fundamentalism? *Feminist Dissent*, No. 2.

Dhingra, S. (2019) 'India's Beef Exports Rise under Modi Govt despite Hindu Vigilante Campaign at Home', *The Print*, March 26.

Dutt, Y. (2019) *Coming out as a Dalit*. Aleph Book Company.

Gandhi, T. (2009) 'Let's Kill Gandhi!' *A Chronicle of his last days, the conspiracy, murder, investigation and trial*. Rupa

Ganesan, P. (2020) 'UP not first to target love Jihad', *The Print* <https://theprint.in/judiciary/up-not-first-to-target-love-jihad-2-states-have-law-against-forced-conversions-for-marriage/552033/>

Golwalkar, M.S. (1939) *We or our Nationhood defined*. Bharat Publications.

International Initiative for Justice (IIJ) (2003) *Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the Genocide in Gujarat*

Jaffrelot, Christophe (2020) Review of Bhanwar Meghwanshi, *'I Could Not Be Hindu' Is a Unique Testimony to the Sangh's' Casteism*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Jaffrelot, Christophe (1996) *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925–1990s*. Hurst publications.

Jha, P. and Prasad A, (2020) Fact check: Did Yogi Adityanath say Dead Muslim women should be raped? *Alt News* <https://www.altnews.in/fact-check-did-up-cm-yogi-adityanath-say-rape-muslim-women-by-taking-them-out-of-graves/>

Johnson T.A. (2019) 'Explained: Dabholkar-Lankesh murders— What the investigations into violent right-wing activism', *The Indian Express*, May 26. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-dabholkar-lankesh-murders-investigations-right-wing-activism-cbi-sit-pansare-kalburgi-5749338/>

Joseph, T. (2018) *Early Indians, The Story of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From*. New Delhi: Juggernaut Books.

Ibrahim, F. (2012) 'Representing the "Minority"' in Robinson, R. ed. *Minority Studies*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

Kaur, R. (2010) 'Khap Panchayats, Sex Ratio and Female Agency', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, No. 23, 14–16.

Mander, H. (2018) *Partitions of the Heart, Unmaking the Idea of India*.  
India Viking.

Marvel, I. (2016) 'In the Name of the Mother'. *The Caravan*.  
<https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/in-the-name-of-the-mother>

Modi, N. (2019) 28 May 2019.  
<https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1133201580855943170?s=20>

Modi N. (2020) 26 November 2020.  
<https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1331889436846559232/photo/2>

Moody, P. (2008) *The Intimate State, Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi*.  
Routledge India.

SAHMAT (2018) *The Republic of Reason: Words they could not kill, Selected writings of Dhabolkar, Pansare, Kalburgi, Lankesh*. SAHMAT Publications.

Savarkar, V. (1923) *Essentials of Hindutva*, pdf found online.

Savarkar, V (2012) *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*. Bombay: Abhishek Publications.

Sarkar, T. (2015) 'Violent and Violated Women in Hindu Extremist Politics', in Doniger, W. and Nussbaum, M., eds. *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right*. Oxford University Press.

Saxena, S. (2018) "'Court'ing Hindu nationalism: law and the rise of modern Hindutva', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 26, Iss 4, 378–399.

Setalvad, T. (2020) 'The Love Jihad Spectre', *The Indian Express*.  
November 13. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/love-jihad-women-freedom-the-love-jihad-spectre-7049722/>

Sharma J. (2003) *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*.  
Penguin Books, India.

Thapar, R. (2014) *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History*. Aleph Books.

Thapar, R., Witzel, M., Menon J., Friese, K., and Khan, R. (2019) *Which of Us are Aryans? Rethinking the Concept of Our Origins*. Aleph Books

**To cite this article:**

Sahgal, G. (2020). Hindutva Past and Present: From Secular Democracy to Hindu Rashtra. *Feminist Dissent*, (5), 19-49. Retrieved from:  
<https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n5.2020.757>