Right-Wing Hindu Nationalism on the World Wide Web:
An Analysis of HinduUnity.org

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Abstract

Although the Hindu nationalist party, BJP, lost control of the Indian government in 2004 following elections, this paper argues that the Hindu nationalist movement, or Hindutva, still seeks to gather support from the Indian diaspora through the medium of the Internet. The paper draws on theories of nationalism offered by Benedict Anderson (1991) and Partha Chaterjee (1993). Since Internet penetration in India is still relatively low, the websites primary audience is inferred to be those living in the diaspora, primarily the United Kingdom and the United States, but other countries as well. Because of this diasporic audience, Stuart Hall's theory on identity formation is discussed. The paper traces the major organizations involved in promoting Hindutva, and finally examines some of those organizations' websites.

Introduction

Although the Hindu nationalist party, BJP, lost control of the Indian government in 2004 following elections, this paper argues that the Hindu nationalist movement, or Hindutva, still seeks to gather support from the Indian diaspora through the medium of the Internet. The paper draws on theories of nationalism offered by Benedict Anderson (1991) and Partha Chaterjee (1993). Since Internet penetration in India is still relatively low, the websites primary audience is inferred to be those living in the diaspora, primarily the United Kingdom and the United States, but other countries as well. Because of this diasporic audience, Stuart Hall's theory on identity formation is discussed. The paper traces the major organizations involved in promoting Hindutva, and finally examines some of those organizations' websites.

Theories of Nationalism

Benedict Anderson's influential book, *Imagined Communities* (1991), originally

published in 1983, stated that the nation is imagined in three ways. One is that it is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them have boundaries beyond which lie other nations. Secondly, a nation is imagined as *sovereign* as a result of Enlightenment ideals that undermined the legitimacy of divinely-ordained monarchy. Finally, the nation is imagined as a community. Regardless of inequality that may exist, essentially there is a horizontal relationship among the masses who will never actually know each other on a personal basis.

Anderson's book is based on the emergence of the European nation. It was the countries of that continent that engaged in the exploitive political-economic system of colonialism whereby the European countries would use the countries of the Americas, Africa, and Asia as a source of raw materials to be processed in the center (Europe) and shipped back to the periphery (colonies). This system essentially produced a dependency by the colonies on the European countries for finished goods.

Such a core-periphery colonial relationship existed between Great Britain and India. India first came into contact with Europe after the establishment of trading outposts by Holland and England in the early seventeenth century. After an initial period of Dutch dominance, the British East India company came to control trade, and eventually established control over India. After a failed mutiny against the British East India Company, India came under direct rule of the British monarchy in 1858.

Ironically, it was colonialism that introduced the idea of a nation to a part of the world which, arguably, had never had such a concept. It was this idea of a nation that would be mobilized by Indian independence fighters, including Gandhi.

Another theorist working in the area of the emergence of nationalism is Partha Chatterjee, particularly in his work *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993). Chatterjee raises the question that if outside of Europe and the Americas, all nations are based on modules that arose in those two areas, what is left to be imagined in the rest of the world? In other words, the peoples outside of Europe and the New World are forced to develop along established patterns of nationness according to Anderson's work. Chatterjee does not reject the idea of "imagined community" *per se*, but he does reject the idea that the only way they can be imagined is in the form taken by European and American nations.

As is the case in his previous work, the title is slightly misleading. Chatterjee's work is not applicable to all nations or even postcolonial nations. Rather, it is specific to the experience of the former British colony of India.

Chatterjee's central argument is that we have mistakenly come to think of nationalism exclusively as a political movement in which the nation is coeval with the state. Chatterjee rejects this view. Instead, he sees the development of two domains in colonial India, one material and the other spiritual. The material domain encompasses the outside world of "the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology" (p. 6), while the spiritual domain is that of cultural identity.

Chatterjee argues that there emerged an Indian nationalism in the spiritual domain prior to a nationalism in the political domain. According to Chatterjee, this cultural national consciousness was a necessary precursor to political national consciousness.

Chatterjee outlines several examples as evidence of the development of this cultural national consciousness. In the world of art, he cites Bengali drama, which drew on classical drama in Sanskrit but reflected a new national consciousness in the nineteenth century. Even in the form of the novel, which Anderson found to be an expression of the European model of the nation, Chatterjee finds traces of nationalism different from that of Europe.

Chatterjee also cites the change in family and especially the role of women as a herald of the new cultural nationalism. To be sure, the new family structure was still patriarchal, but it rejected the Western notion of family and women's role also.

Despite his claim that there developed a cultural consciousness of nationness, Chatterjee acknowledges that this consciousness had to insert itself in the political domain according to models developed in Europe as a means to secure independence. Chatterjee's basic theme is that by putting on the cloak of the modern state, colonial states restricted how they were to develop after securing independence. He writes, "Here lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of the modern community but in our surrender to the old forms of the modern state" (p. 11). Having theorized the nation-state, and before going on to a discussion of the Hindu national organizations, we need to briefly discuss the identity formation of groups since it is inferred the intended audience of our website are diasporic Indians.

Diasporic Identities

One of the basic tenets of cultural studies is the nonessential nature of identity. Stuart Hall writes, "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1994, p. 392).

Representation, then, takes on an important role for Hall. For Hall, all identity is contextually based. There is no pre-existing ethnicity for Hall but only those that come into being through discourse, which includes practices of representation. Other scholars like Butler (1997), have argued the same for gender. In this

age of media saturation, representation becomes an important force for identity construction.

The more traditional conception of cultural identity held that there was something more stable and more essential behind all the superficial differences among a group that shared a common history. Indeed, this point of view has served as a beneficial source of solidarity among people in search of social justice who are able to come together to pursue common goal. Moreover, some scholars continue to advocate association based on such shared oppression for strategic reasons (Spivak, 1996).

The second conception of cultural identity holds that there are significant differences among people who share a common history that prevent them from being lumped together as an undifferentiated group. Hall writes, "Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture… [I]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (1994, p. 394). Hall acknowledges that these positions can be ascribed or chosen. Under colonialism, the discourse ascribed the colonized as "Other" and made the colonized see themselves as Other (Fanon, 1961; Said, 1978). Because of the struggle between ascribed and chosen identity, there is always a politics of identity in a nonessential view of identity. Hall gives the example of the Caribbean in which there are two vectors: one of "similarity and continuity" and one of "difference and rupture" (Hall, 1994, p. 395). The slaves that were forcefully removed and forced to work in the plantations all came from Africa. Yet, they also represented many countries, tribal groups, linguistic groups, and religious orientations. These differences led to give those transplanted to the New World a diasporic identity. Hall states, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (1994, p. 402). An example of this constant renewal of identities took place in England.

Politically, this is the moment when the term 'black' was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities… 'The black experience,' as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became 'hegemonic' over other ethnic/racial identities- though the latter did not, of course, disappear. (Hall, 1996, p. 441)

This alliance was based on the marginalization of the non-Anglo-Saxon groups and resulted in the challenging of representation in "music and style, later in literary, visual and cinematic forms" (Hall, 1996, p. 442).

The new black cultural/political consciousness signified a two-pronged attack on black representation. The first was to claim a right to have access to representation of themselves, and the second was to contest the marginality, fetishization, and stereotyping of blacks. The importance of the politics of representation becomes apparent when discourse is seen as constitutive and not merely reflexive. Hall

writes, "This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation- subjectivity, identity, politics- a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life" (1996, p. 443).

Overview of Hindu Nationalist Groups

This traditional lack of "India" as a historical idea has not kept post-Independence Hindu nationalists from trying to reconstruct just such a history. Chief among the organized Hindu groups are the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). None of the three groups mentioned above are fringe groups. In fact, the BJP is the political party in control of India's government. The RSS is a militant group that tries to recruit male youths, and the VHP is a transnational organization that serves as the closest thing to a central authority on Hindu dogma.

Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Peter van der Veer (1994) has written that Hindu nationalists bought into the Orientalist constructions of an Indian past. Such an Orientalist construction can be seen in John Oman's version of the *Ramayana*, in which he inserts commentary on the nature of Indian society for his Western readers. However, van der Veer criticizes Said for not recognizing the complicity on the part of the colonized in developing Orientalism.

 Van der Veer (1994) cites Vivekananda, whose message was intended for Western audiences, as well as the Indian middle class, as an exemplar of an Indian collaborator for Orientalism. Also along these lines is the desire to fix the *Gita* as the authoritative text of Hinduism, when no such status was afforded it in the past. In fact, Hindu-*ism* is a creation of colonialism as a result of a desire to create a religion for India.

Van der Veer's (1994) central thesis is that Hindu nationalists are not anti-modern. They subscribe to the notion of the very modern idea of the nation-state described by Anderson. What they are against is a secular state. However, here again they justify their anti-secularism with the very Western, democratic ideal of majority rule. They claim that India is essentially a Hindu country, where the minorities (including Muslims and Christians) should just be grateful they are allowed to reside there.

They view the Muslim and British rule of India as a low point of Indian history. However, they strongly feel that now is the time to reclaim India's "glorious" past. Here again, we see an overlap between the Orientalist view and Hindu nationalist view of India as a once great civilization. The Hindu nationalists take it upon themselves to bring that glory back.

The biggest impediment seen by right-wing groups to reclaiming India's glory is the Muslim rule of India and its present Muslim population. That is why almost every Hindu nationalist uses the site of Ayodhya, where a Muslim mosque was built on the site the supposed birthplace of Rama, as a rabble-rousing symbol.

In 1984, the VHP began agitating the situation in earnest when they began demanding a lock on the mosque compound be removed. The lock had been placed at the time of India's independence in 1947, effectively keeping both the Muslim and Hindu community from entering the premises. The Hindu right gained momentum in 1990 with an escalation of the Kashmir issue with Pakistan, an escalation that always translates into anti-Muslim feelings within India. A second factor in 1990 was the decision by the government to implement a report by the Mandal Commission that increased the number of spaces for "scheduled castes." This surge in Hindu nationalism culminated on December 6, 1992 when the mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed following a rally organized by the BJP and VHP. Communal violence erupted all over India, with over a thousand people, mostly Muslims, dying in Bombay alone (van der Veer 1994).

Moreover, right-wing Hinduism, especially the VHP, which translates roughly into *World* Hindu Council, has been adept at mobilizing the Indian diaspora. As Vijay Prashad (2000) has written, many diasporic Indians may feel impotent politically in their own land, so they turn to Hindu nationalism for a sense of identity. According to Prashad, the Ayodhya carnage served as a catalyst for political maneuvering by a group calling themselves the "Concerned NRIs" (non-resident Indians). He writes, "[T]hese desis found an avenue to make an alliance with the U.S. state against what the United States called 'Muslim fanaticism.' Some even used the conjuncture to argue that India could be the Israel of Asia, a U.S. fortress against Islam (Pakistan) and communism (China)" (p. 135). They took out ads in Indian and Indian-American newspapers congratulating the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque.

One website that tries to appeal to diasporic Indians is HinduUnity.org. Internet use in India, while growing, is still relatively low. Therefore, it must be assumed a primary target of HinduUnity.org are those Indians overseas since they are more likely to have regular Internet access.

Method and Analysis

The analysis of the website was done at two different intervals seperated by about twenty months. The first analysis was done in May 2003 and the second was done in February 2005. The gap in dates is important because of the change in political leadership from the Hindu nationalist BJP to the more secular Congress party. First the website will be described in the summer of 2003, and then as it is in January 2005.

Summer 2003

As you enter the site, a pop-up browser advertises the following organizations with links to their pages: Bajrang Dal**,** Vishwa Hindu Parishad**,** Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh**,** Shiv Sena, H.V.K**,** Hindu Force**,** S.P. Attri's Essays**,** Sarvarkar Darshan
Soldiers of Hindutva**,** Nation of Hindutva**,** Hindu Holocaust Museum**,** and the Saffron Tigers. While it will take further research to determine the exact relationships between these organizations, it is safe to say they collectively constitute a family of right-wing Hindu organizations dedicated to Hindutva, or a Hindu

state.

The primary banner across the top of the main page reads "Together we shall fight to protect our culture, heritage & religion." To the left is a logo that depicts an outline of India with Hanuman, the monkey-god from the Ramayana that represents loyalty, rising with weapon clutched in his hand. To the right is a pair of crossed daggers. There is an immediate sense of militancy as a result of the word "fight" in the motto and the icons employed. However, the fight is not one of aggression, but protection, as the motto states. This is a theme found throughout the site: Hinduism is not a religion of aggression, but it is also not one of pacifism either when pushed too far. The organization's goal appears to be to portray a religion whose very survival is at stake, necessitating the need for immediate action.

This theme of necessary militancy was apparent at the time of this analysis in the featuring of a picture of Mahatma Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, in honor of his birthday. The text read, "Celebrating Shri Nathuram Godse Diwas- May 19th." Shri is a title of respect in India. Mahatma Gandhi, contrary to many Westerner's conception, did have a Hindu apologist's streak, which led to praise of the virtues of Hinduism. Despite Gandhi's Hindu leanings, he was still too accommodating of Muslims for Hindus like Godse.

In addition, the main page consists of a call to action to boycott the American Eagle Outfitters chain because of their misappropriation of the Hindu god Ganesh for a bag they sell. It reads in capital letters, "INSULT TO HINDU GODS BY AE.COM!" Since this is an American retail chain, it is apparent it is those Indians in the United States being called on to boycott the store. However, there is also an online petition against the store, so it is possible for those living in India to be a part of this protest.

Below the American Eagle boycott call is a news item about violence in Kashmir against Hindus. The headline reads in all capital letters, "24 HINDU PANDITS KILLED IN KASHMIR BY MUSLIMS. 2 HINDU CHILDREN DIED IN MASSACRE." In both statistics on who was killed, it is emphasized that the victims were Hindu: 24 *Hindu* pandits. 2 *Hindu* children. The headline also claims that they were killed by *Muslims.* It does not say Muslim extremists, or Muslim insurgents, or Kashmiri rebels. By identifying the killers as just Muslims, it essentializes a religion of over a billion people and turns them all into killers.

Below the headline is a paragraph that starts with the sentence, "THE SOLUTION FOR HINDU GENOCIDE IS HINDU MILITANCY!" Below that is a series of eight pictures that show victims. Of the eight pictures, three are of the parents of the two children killed, and three are of the actual children killed, so there seems to be a deliberate attempt to highlight the children that were the victims since they constituted six of eight pictures, but only two of twenty-six victims.

Next, there are five links to various news items that relate to various things like Christian missionary activity, the death of a Hindu holy man, and excavation of the Ayodhya site. Interestingly, they do not call

this the site of the mosque, but as Ram Janmabhumi, or Rama's birthplace.

Next, is an item that relates to India-United States unity with regard to the Iraqi war. It states, "HinduUnity.org wishes to send prayers to all the American and allied forces serving in the Iraqi War for their honorable service for the sake freedom (sic)! May you all return home safely and at the same time crush the evil Islamic empire that has caused havoc in the U.S., India, Israel and many other parts of the world. God bless you all!"

Here we have the evocation of good versus evil found in the simplistic worldview of current administrations in the United States and Israel. The partnership with the United States and Israel seems to be a strategic one since both those countries have strong military-industrial complexes. Perhaps not coincidentally, there is a link, the only one that is an image, to the left of the paragraph above for Kahane.org, a right-wing Jewish group.

The entire left border of the site is for links, many of which take you off the HinduUnity.org site. The reason it is probably not a coincidence that the Kahane.org site appears next to the article on Iraq is because there is a more elaborate section on Israel further down the page. In addition to Kahane.org are links to the Jewish Defense League, Masada 2000, United Jerusalem, and several others. They are all under the heading "Israel Forever."

Also is a section on Sikhism. The site is friendly to Sikhism since it was a religion that appeared on Indian soil. Therefore, the religion can be reconciled with Hindutva.

Winter 2005

An examination of the website more recently, and after the victory of the Congress Party of the national government in 2004, reveals the main theme of the website is unchanged: the danger posed by Islam to Indian national identity. However, because of the tsunami, the relief effort is getting prominent attention, but even with this, the focus is on which charities one should not donate to because of their "anti-Indianness." Also with Congress in power, special vitriol is directed at Sonia Gandhi, head of the Congress Party.

Prominent on the main page is the unequivocal message**:** "ISLAM = TERRORISM! FIGHT ISLAM AND PROTECT YOUR COUNTRY & FREEDOM."

The petition to boycott American Eagle is gone, but there is a new petition. This one aims to prevent Salman Khan from playing Lord Ram. The petition is worth quoting at length:

> But even if we were to forget about this person's past for a moment, we still can't understand why non-Hindu actors and Hindu actresses are being chosen for the main cast in spite of the fact that the Ramayana is a Hindu religious text and in spite of the fact that this movie being produced in India, for a primarily Hindu audience. However, what takes the cake is that given the well-known history of hostility of Muslims towards Hindus,

they have still chosen two Muslim actors to represent our Lords Shri Ram and Shri Lakshman and a Hindu actress to represent Mother Sita. Is this not a deliberate challenge to Hindus and a well-planned attempt to humiliate us? Did the producer not find one Hindu male in a population of at least 400 million Hindu males to play the role of Shri Ram? Is this clearly not an attempt to insult Mother Sita by portraying her as the wife of a Muslim? In fact, we strongly believe that the pseudo-secularism brigade in Bollywood have purposefully selected a Muslim to play the role just to hit at all the self-respecting and proud Hindus of this world. This is yet another calculated move to insult Hindus just like the recent abduction of the Hindu housewife Kanchan Mishra in Bihar and the mass rape of 12 Hindu women in a madrassa in West Bengal.

It is our firm conviction that Muslims have no business messing around with our religion. It's not because they have been allowed to stay back in India after partition that they feel they have a right to malign our Hindu religion too. Why does Salman Khan not make a movie about the life of his prophet the 'great' Mohammed instead and use a Hindu to play the role? Are Hindu Gods considered so cheap by Mr. Salman Khan that they can be represented by an immoral and indecent character like him? Being mentally sick is not wrong in itself, but trying to impersonate the gods of other people while being aware of this fact is a clear attempt to provoke others with similar beliefs. This type of stunt could seriously undermine the confidence of the Hindu youth; having their role model and spiritual guardian being played by a Muslim of loose morals. (Petition Online)

As noted above, major difference is the large play the relief effort undertaking by HinduUnity for the tsunami victims is getting. However, even when it comes to this, there is a link to anti-Hindu charities readers are advised not to donate to, even if the proceeds go to tsunami victims. The list includes prominent charities such as American India Foundation, Asha For Education, and India Literacy Project. There is no explanation of why HinduUnity advises against donation. It may be nothing more than the charities do not discriminate based on religious or other factors when distributing their aid.

Another difference from 2003 and 2005 is the targeting Sonia Gandhi, because of her Italian background. She is head of the Congress Party (although she voluntarily gave up the prime ministership). Sonia Gandhi is the widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was himself the son of Indira Gandhi, and the grandson of India's first prime minister, Nehru.

One link reads, "Sonia is a national security threat for India."   In a link titled, "Do you know your Sonia?" information such as the fact that her real name is Antonia, not Sonia is offered. Apparently, the author feels this is important information, even though she has been called "Sonia" since a very early age.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the idea of a nation is not fixed but is continually being negotiated. The same is true of diasporic populations. The analysis of HinduUnity.org at two different times separated by about twenty months shows that consistently Hindu nationalists in India are trying to mobilize overseas Indians to their cause of Hindutva through their website. Because of the minority status of many, if not all, diasporic Indians, it is possible they are vulnerable to these types of appeals to national identity based on Hinduism. The overall theme of the site, both in 2003 and 2005, is that of a religion and land (inextricably intertwined in the Hindutva view) under siege. Although some of the militancy of the siege is aimed against Christian missionary work, there does not appear to be the virulence there is against Islam.

Perhaps HinduUnity.org cannot go too far in attacking Christianity without coming into conflict with their support for the United States, a country whose own ideologues would like to see transformed into a Christian state. However, Islam is attacked with full fury. Islam appears to be the Other through which right-wing Hinduism defines itself as the Self. All this is done through a World Wide Web site, which highlights the fact that religious nationalism in India is not anti-modern.

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