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Saving the Soul of India

Christian Conversion and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism

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As a group of American and Indian scholars arrived at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Delhi on a late June afternoon in 2015, they were greeted by green and orange buntings draped along the path toward the front door. Fluttering beside a print of Warner Sallman's *Christ at Heart's Door* in the entryway was a large saffron flag with an image of an open lotus flower, the symbol of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Within a few minutes it became clear that the YMCA guesthouse where the scholars had booked their rooms was also hosting a gathering of BJP staff from across the country. Volunteers and party workers had arrived to prepare for the next big election in the Christian-majority Northeast of India. This gathering was important because although the BJP had won handily in the general election, it suffered serious setbacks in the Northeast, which was governed by the Congress Party since 2001.

Enthusiasm and zeal to "evangelize" the Christian-dominated Northeast were palpable at the YMCA. Hordes of BJP foot-soldiers wrapped in saffron-colored shawls marched in and out of the building armed with their lotus-print book bags filled with party literature. To Western eyes the scene was not unlike a Christian missionary conference in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in London or Chicago, where hundreds of Christian missionaries were urged to head out to the far-flung "regions beyond" to win the world for Christ. BJP foot-soldiers attended numerous strategy sessions and gathered in doorways, along corridors, and on garden benches to discuss ways in which the "unreached" could be reached with the "gospel" of the BJP. Less than a year later, in May 2016, the party's "Look Northeast" plan yielded its first successful result: a rousing BJP victory against the Congress Party in the state of Assam. The party has

since been able to build a strong base for the 2019 general election in Christian-majority states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya.

A Clash of Proselytizations?

Expressions of Hindu nationalism, however, do not always assume the benign (if highly organized and assertive) form we witnessed at the Delhi YMCA. During a twelve-month period in India during 2016-17, a church was burned down or a cleric beaten, on average, about ten times a week.[1] Violent incidents of this kind are in turn justified as a kind of Hindu self-defense against provocation and even coercion on the part of missionizing and proselytizing Christians. They are based on allegations that conversion to Christianity in India is now—and throughout history has often been—the result of force, allurement, or threats of violence. As a result, over the past decade, more and more states in India have enacted anti-conversion laws, and pressure is mounting to pass a national anti-conversion law. Ironically called "freedom of religion" laws, these laws mainly seek to restrict the poor and outcastes from converting to Christianity. Most anti-conversion acts mention the need to "protect women and minors" and other susceptible communities from the vulgarity of forced conversions. These laws specify doubled penalties for such attempts.

For example, on August 2, 2017, the state government of Jharkhand proposed the "Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Bill 2017." The bill criminalizes conversions that occur by "force, inducement, or fraud." It is noteworthy, though, that the definitions of these three terms are left ambiguous in the bill. For example, the promise of "everlasting life" may be construed as an "inducement" and warrant severe punishment, including up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 rupees (around US$800)—a significant sum for most Indian Christians.

At the same time, there is little embarrassment about the use of inducements or incentives to proselytize and promote conversion in the other direction—that is, from Christianity to Hinduism. In March 2014, the

Indian Supreme Court ruled that anyone who "reconverted" (a word pregnant with significance) to Hinduism, even if his parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents were Christian, could return to the "fold of the community and regain his membership (and therefore benefits) that were available to members of Scheduled Castes."[2] These benefits include grants for housing, education, vehicles, and reserved seats in government colleges and legislative bodies, among others.

Undoubtedly, the acts of witness, evangelism, propagation, and sharing the faith's main message are important parts of both Islam and Christianity. They are, it seems, particularly integral to Christian faith. Over the years, conversions to both faiths have become a bone of contention in India and Sri Lanka, but in recent years, the target of anti-conversion legislation seems largely to be Christianity.

The Makings of a New Hinduism

One of the most striking developments in the past twenty years has been the growing influence of the sociopolitical ideology known as Hindutva. The politics of Hindutva, as represented by the agenda and policies of India's ruling party, the BJP, cannot be separated from large grassroots movements like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). These paramilitary organizations, with their well-knit networks of *shakas*, or cells, in the hundreds of villages throughout India, provide the organizational backbone of the BJP—a grassroots strength and presence not available to any other political party. The recent win in Northeast India can in part be attributed to the influence of RSS-funded schools like the Ekal Vidyalaya and the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, which helped to soften negative attitudes toward the RSS and BJP by conducting free tutorials for school children among the poor, mainly Christian tribal communities. Such efforts are in fact part of a long-term strategy of religious, cultural, and political proselytization whereby Indian Tribals or Adivasis ("forest dwellers")—who generally do not come from Hindu backgrounds in any meaningful sense—are aggressively recruited to Hinduism and the Hindutva ideology.

In current and popular perspective, both in India and in the West, the Hindutva ideology of the BJP and of those in the *Sangh Parivar* (family of Hindu-nationalist organizations) are assumed to be "Hindu" and closely aligned to "Hinduism" in the religious and non-native[3] sense of the word. Many today think of Hinduism as a single, easily identifiable "world religion"[4] that we read about in school text books and see represented in the media.

However, it was not until the aggressive propagation of a reconstructed "neo-Hinduism" in the nineteenth century that the term "Hinduism" came

to signify a unified and inclusive religious entity in India and the West. The historian Robert Frykenberg points out that the concept of "Hinduism" that is used today across the world in popular parlance was first used to describe anyone or anything native to the entire region of South Asia.[5] The term "Hindavi," as it was known in Arabic and Persian, was used to distinguish between the native (holder of the faith) and the unbeliever who was referred to as "kafir." Frykenberg writes that when early Europeans came to South Asia, they described what they saw by distinguishing between people who were indigenous—"Hindoo"—and people who were not. It was not uncommon for indigenous Christians to be called "Hindoo Christians" or, similarly, native Muslims to be called "Hindoo Muslims."[6] Therefore, the term "Hindu," before the revisions of the nineteenth century, referred to anything or anyone native to India.

Modern Hinduism we see today and the one that took shape over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries does not necessarily correspond neatly with the vast diversity and dynamism of religious traditions in India. Furthermore, in a continent where thousands of deities are worshiped and where followers of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity trace their ancestry back thousands of years, it is probably insuperably difficult to think of neo-Hinduism as the one overarching, all-inclusive religious system of the subcontinent.

To a great extent, the modern neo-Hindu reform movement was shaped by high-caste Brahmins who were responsible for reading and translating religious texts and laws for the British scholars and elites.[7] Romila Thapar suggests that the new Hinduism fortified with strong Brahmanical teachings was now combined with elements of "upper caste belief and ritual [and] with one eye on Christian and Islamic models."[8] Hindu reformers were faced with the challenge of how to make Hinduism more comparable to the Judeo-Christian (and even Islamic) conception of the nature of religion and thus undertook an effort to verify the historical accuracy of deities and

sacralize their purported birthplaces such as Ayodhya for Lord Rama or Mathura for Lord Krishna.[9] From their effort to emulate Abrahamic faiths, these reformers also sought to reconstruct Hinduism so as to marginalize and even condemn the idol-worship of ordinary believers and instead place greater emphasis on a canon of Hindu scriptures that they were developing. They thus devoted great energy to arguing for the authority, antiquity, and coherence of that body of Hindu writings, particularly the Vedas. Other additions to the new version of Hinduism formulated and propagated by the Hindu reformers included the support of the ecclesiastical authority of the Brahmins as well as the legitimacy and urgency of proselytization.[10]

One episode helps to illustrate how the Hindu reform movement was transformed from a relatively isolated and parochial intellectual initiative to a major cultural and political phenomenon with far-reaching international impact. This was the appearance of a young Hindu reformer, Swami Vivekananda, at the first World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda arrived uninvited, but his address is seen by many as the "turning point"[11] in the modern Hindu revival. In the first sentence he uttered to the gathering, he asserted that Hinduism was the "mother of all religions":[12] "I thank you in the name of the mother of all religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects. . . . I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance."[13]

On the double assumption that Vivekananda enjoyed the authority to speak on behalf of millions of Hindus and that these Hindus constituted a single community sharing a univocal tradition, he announced that Hinduism had taught and continued to teach the world about tolerance and had always welcomed people of different faiths to its shores. On the one hand, Vivekananda's statement at once unified and elevated Hinduism to the level of a tutor with a single, authoritative message. On the other hand, it

demoted other faiths to the status of inferior pupils, who could, at best, merely learn from this ancient and tolerant faith.

While Vivekananda thus found a global platform to reconceive and reconstruct Hinduism, it in fact remained a highly disparate set of beliefs and practices that had for millennia defied self-definition and order, and where literally thousands of deities were worshiped. Indeed, Hindu faith and practice was less a monolith than a subcontinental swirl of rituals, festivals, and devotional practices. But Vivekanada was undeterred; building on the work of previous modernist Hindu reformers, he sought to turn Hinduism into something that deserved global respect and recognition. He recast it as a religious tradition that, he would argue, outdid all other religious traditions across every conceivable dimension. In Vivekananda's reconstruction, Hinduism became, all at once, supremely ancient, authoritative, coherent, flexible, reasonable, inclusive, and tolerant.

Over time, many Western elites became convinced that the "Hinduism" as reconstructed by Vivekananda and others was a single ancient and inclusive religion and that it represented most, if not all, the peoples of South Asia.[14] In their eyes, notes historian Christopher Bayly, this synthesized version of Hinduism with its sacred scriptures, ecclesial structures, and focus on a single Supreme Being seemed to parallel their own Christian and Jewish traditions in some respects but also to surpass them in other ways, particularly in its putative inclusiveness, flexibility, and tolerance. Bayly notes that the rhetoric around the new "Hinduism" conveyed an underlying unity of Hinduism by resonating with the preconceived beliefs of Westerners. For Westerners, by and large, a single, unified religion required a single, coherent textual tradition revolving around the interpretation of an ancient, authoritative set of sacred scriptures. Vivekananda and other reformers convinced a growing number of Westerners that Hinduism was a coherent, respectable religion *according to Western standards*.[15] In the eyes of the Hindu reformers, the fact that

Westerners could recognize and respect Hinduism as a powerful and ancient tradition that even outperformed Western religions on their own preferred terms enhanced the prestige and social power of their reconstructed "Hinduism."

This view of Hinduism as a supremely coherent and ancient religion and one, moreover, that represented most Indians, was particularly welcome at a time of increasing national struggle and unrest. This reconstruction made it possible for Hinduism to go from being a site of contestation and fluidity among profoundly opposed local traditions and practices to be a coherent and inspiring focus of cultural unity, national identity, and anti-colonial political mobilization. It also made Westerners doubt the necessity or reasonableness of Christian missionary efforts. Why would any Indian need another religion if their indigenous and ancient religion is so similar to, if not superior to, Christianity? Why would Indians need to go beyond their cultural and religious boundaries to find a non-native religion? Within the terms set by the modern Hindu reformers and many of their Western interlocutors, the questions appeared to answer themselves.

Hindutva

To an outsider looking in, this version of unified Hinduism might have
seemed remarkably tidy and perhaps even boring, having been stripped of
its fanciful and colorful mythologies and rituals. Yet this version of
Hinduism is the progenitor of the political ideology and nationalistic
religion of Hindutva. Indeed, Hindutva is the political and nationalist child
of the reconstructed Hinduism formulated and propagated by Vivekananda
and his fellow modern reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries. Vivekananda passed away in 1902. Only two decades later,
Hindutva was already a fully formed ideology and social movement, with
the foundation of the Hindu-nationalist mother-ship, the RSS, in 1925.[16]

   Perhaps the clearest understanding of what motivated the founders of
Hindutva to establish the RSS and later the BJP comes from sociologist
Ashis Nandy. At the heart of the Hindutva project, he argues, is a profound
disappointment, even disgust, with the weakness and deficiencies in
Hinduism. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was the Marathi intellectual and
anti-colonialist firebrand who coined the term "Hindutva." In fact, Savarkar
frequently compared Hinduism *unfavorably* with the Semitic religions—
Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—because in his mind the former lacked a
uniform and well organized structure that was "capable of being a
sustaining ideology for an imperious state."[17] He thus saw Hinduism as
"effeminate, spineless and non-martial and, thus, as vulnerable to the more
aggressive faith such as Islam and Christianity."[18] Nandy suggests that
RSS leaders like Savarkar
secretly admired the masculine strands of the Semitic faiths, especially
European Christianity. Hindu nationalists firmly believed that Hinduism had
been weakened because the pure and rational Vedic religion had become
sullied by beliefs and practices that were fantastical and ignorant. Dayanand

Saraswati, a Hindu reformer who in the nineteenth century founded the Vedic-centered reformist movement known as the Arya Samaj, reserved his harshest criticism for the native Indian religious movements such as Buddhism, Jainism, and various forms of Hindu metaphysics. He also attacked Hindu sects, known as Vaishnavites, that worshiped Lord Vishnu. Saraswati deplored the fact that "the Jain idols were always naked and represented a being who was seated in a contemplative mood and renounced the world, while on the contrary the Vaishnava idols symbolized gods having by their sides goddesses, who were dressed out in fine style and excited lascivious thoughts by their lewd charms and licentious looks."[19] Saraswati blamed Hindu mythology and idol worship for making Indians superstitious and ignorant. He also argued that practices such as wearing *rudraksha* beads (holy beads), burning incense, or smearing one's forehead with a tilak or covering one's body in ashes made Indians weak and unable to fight to preserve their culture and their national life. They were no different, he said, from "donkeys and pigs and other animals who wallow in dust."[20]

The other reason for the formation of Hindutva was to bring order to a religion that had been given over to indolence and chaos. Hindus, the reformers felt, needed to be roused to defend and fight for their land and their culture. Hinduism, in its current irrational form, was a chaotic and disorganized faith divided by its numerous schools of philosophies, thousands of deities, and its fascination with myths and legends. Hindu reformers such as Saraswati, Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and Savarkar[21] believed that these weaknesses and flaws in popular Hinduism had made Hindus "incapable of resisting the more organized, rational faiths."[22]

As historian Robert Frykenberg suggests, these efforts were a part of a calculated institutional, ideological and political agenda. While working to revise the structure, beliefs, and practices of Hinduism, Hindu reformers infused the new faith with a political and nationalistic emphasis.[23] And

historian Romila Thapar suggests that efforts to codify Hinduism into a single religious rubric created what she terms "Syndicated Hinduism."[24] Over the years, Syndicated Hinduism provided the means for Hindu nationalists to propagate their ideology through cultural and political organizations such as the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha and, much later, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the BJP, and the Bajrang Dal.

Syndicated Hinduism's importance has become particularly apparent within communities of transnational Hindus—the Hindu diaspora—who are seeking a version of their faith that they can respect and propagate as a "peer competitor" with Christianity and other world religions. Thapar maintains that the diaspora communities with their tremendous wealth and influence continue to provide the basis and support for Syndicated Hinduism.[25] We see versions of a sanitized and Westernized Hinduism in films that are directed toward the growing numbers of Indians living in the United States and the United Kingdom. Indeed, Syndicated Hinduism has become an influential, transnational, syndicated enterprise. Once the RSS and its sister organizations were shadowy and secretive. This was particularly so in the aftermath of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, whose murderer enjoyed close links to several individuals actively involved in the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. Today, however, the RSS enjoys unprecedented respect, visibility, and reach. The organization has thousands of units spread uniformly over the country. Its members sit in parliament. The BJP, while politically powerful, has always remained dependent on fringe groups such as the RSS and the Shiv Sena.

Conversion

At the heart of any form of religious traditionalism or revivalism, whether Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jain, or Sikh, is the perceived threat of change to established rituals, practices, social order, and what one may term the "traditional way of life." The prospect of large numbers of Hindus converting from the religion and culture of their birth to either Christianity or Islam represents an existential threat that is simultaneously cultural, religious, national, and geopolitical. It represents a sword of Damocles hanging over Hindu values, traditions, and customs that are ingrained in the social and religious fabric of Indian life. Additionally, in the eyes of Hindu nationalists, conversion to either Christianity or Islam represents the corruption of an Indian's proper identity and the betrayal of loyalty. Conversion to Christianity is not only seen as a rejection of a person's Indian identity but also as the taking on of a foreign identity.

Large-scale conversions to Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sparked these fears and helped to intensify movements of Hindu counter-mobilization and counter-proselytization to an extreme degree. In 1871, the Indian Census showed that the majority of Catholic as well as Protestant adherents in India were non-Brahmin and were drawn from the lowest castes. By 1931, for example, a vast number of outcastes[26] in Andhra Pradesh had converted to Christianity. In some areas of the state there were converts in every untouchable hamlet.[27] In Guntur district alone, 57 percent of the district converted to Christianity. Malas and Madigas, the main untouchable caste groups, made up most of the converts in the state and by 1900 constituted an established and flourishing Christian community with ordained ministers and established churches.

Christian mission movements since the early 1800s were designed and geared to evangelize the upper castes and were based on the then popular

notion of "Sanskritization," which presupposed that the lower sections of the community imitated the lifestyle of the higher, more dominant castes. A majority of mainstream Christian missions believed that Christianity would percolate downward from the upper castes to the lower castes and therefore much effort was put into evangelizing the upper castes during the early 1800s. The dramatic results of mass conversions of non-Brahmin, and the lowest untouchable caste groups, to Christianity during the 1870s was received with "mixed emotions"[28] by Protestant missions at the time. In 1928, Dr. John Mott, chair of the International Missionary Council, suggested that American Methodist Bishop and missionary to India J. Waskom Pickett[29] (then editor of the journal *Indian Witness*) conduct an "impartial scientific survey of ten or a dozen Christian conversion movements"[30] taking place in India. To be clear, Mott's motive was not enthusiasm for these mass conversions but rather the opposite: he feared that these movements were either not very deep or authentic or would prove an obstacle to the evangelization of India, or both.

The mass movements of conversion to Christianity in the middle of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presented a dramatic departure as thousands of outcastes moved from Hinduism to Christianity. Yet the clear majority of the converts to Christianity were the least "Hindu" of Indians—Dalits (outcastes) and Adivasis (tribal communities) who had lived on the periphery of traditional religious life. Writing in 1906 after studying the outcastes in India, Abbe Dubois, a French ethnographer, notes, "The idea that he was born to be in subjection to other castes was so ingrained in his mind that it never occurs to the Pariah to think his fate is anything but irrevocable."[31] Yet as Bishop J. Waskom Pickett's seminal study of the spiritual and social impact of the mass movements of conversion to Christianity[32] indicated, conversion promoted a radically positive sense of worth and will in the converts, so that over time a virtuous cycle was created where the empowered and mobilized converts were able to

transform their lives and the lives of their families and community. "Christians have acquired a new concept of themselves," Pickett observed, and "this or a like concept has been accepted by their neighbors. Confirmation of this theory is provided by the decline of the use of the old term by which Christians in this area were known before their conversion. The term 'Chura' is falling into disuse. Hindu, Moslem, and Sikh informants told us that they seldom or never refer to the Christians in their villages by the old caste name."[33]

The idea that Christianity could transform the economic and social lives of its adherents was nothing new. Since the nineteenth century, conversionary forms of Protestantism had been consistently associated with lower levels of alcohol consumption and drug use. In many countries, revivalist Protestants helped spur the temperance movement in reaction to a rapid increase in the supply and consumption of distilled alcohol. Historians suggest that temperance was associated with economic uplift in both frontier and urban communities[34] and Protestant activists helped spread temperance worldwide.

Although conversions to Christianity had occurred steadily in India from the sixteenth century on, it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the population of Indian Christians rose dramatically. As a primarily rural phenomenon, it was not uncommon for an entire village comprising a few hundred people to come to Christ at the same time.[35] At the start of World War I there were more than a million outcaste converts to Christianity and many more followed during the next two decades. Perhaps it was the spectacular size and speed at which vast numbers of outcaste Hindus became Christians that prompted Hindu nationalists to cast aspersions on the validity of these conversions and to assume that they occurred because of material or instrumental reasons and that the converts were merely "rice Christians."

The opposition of Hindu reformers and later Hindu nationalists to the outcaste conversions to Christianity was intense. Groups such as the Arya Samaj engaged in aggressive counter-missionary efforts, sometimes using the traditional Hindu cleansing or purification ceremony known as to convert—or reconvert—Christians to Hinduism. Opposition also came from Mahatma Gandhi, who shared with Hindu reformers such as Vivekananda a nationalist pride in the unity and respectability of Hinduism and an optimism about its potential to be reformed. Gandhi styled himself a defender of the rights of the depressed classes, and he was open to the influence of religion in political life (and thus stood in contrast to Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw religious mobilization as an inherent threat to the secular India he envisioned). Also, at this stage in his life, Gandhi knew a great deal about the teachings of Christ and enjoyed Christian hymns and prayers, thanks in no small part to close friends such as C. F. Andrews who knew him from his time in South Africa. Nevertheless, despite being more than familiar with the Christian gospel and sympathetic to the person of Jesus Christ, whom he venerated, Gandhi mounted increasingly intense public attacks on Christian missions, accusing them of "co-opting"[36] untouchables (outcastes) into the Christian fold.

Specifically, Gandhi demanded that Christian missions confine their work with untouchables to social and economic uplift and not interfere—as he saw it—in areas of religious confession and commitment. For many mass movement converts who were untouchables, Gandhi's position was deeply unsettling,[37] for he was taking a skeptical view of conversion:

> I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is a highly personal matter for the individual and his God. . . . It is a conviction daily growing upon me that the great and rich Christian missions will render true service to India, if they can persuade themselves to confine their activities to humanitarian service without the ulterior motive of converting India or at least her unsophisticated villagers to Christianity and destroying their social superstructure which notwithstanding its many defects has stood now from time immemorial.[38]

Even as Mahatma Gandhi publicly excoriated Christian missions for what he saw as unfairly luring the poor away from Hinduism, Indian Christians such as the first Indian Anglican Bishop, V. S. Azariah, urged missionaries to redouble their efforts to evangelize the outcastes since "the widespread and deep unrest among the depressed classes . . . constitutes a Call of God to the Christian Church which it cannot ignore."[39] Azariah had spent most of his tenure as bishop trying to rescue the untouchables from the "social superstructures" of caste and enforced exclusion. He worked hard to eradicate caste-centeredness of Indian culture within the church and replace it with what he called a "new brotherhood."[40] He insisted—and faced tremendous resistance from his congregants—that converts from different caste groups were required to attend the same churches, drink from the same communion cup, go to the same school, and eat together in public celebrations like weddings and harvest festivals.

The presumption of Gandhi—and more recently of Mohan Bhagwat, the leader of the RSS, who has publicly questioned the motivation of Mother Teresa's service to the poor—is that Christians manipulate the disadvantaged to receive and adopt a religious message in exchange for material help.[41] But for Azariah and for the many Indian Christians who work among the poor, Christianity alone embodies a life of dignity and hope for a future free of degradation and subservience. Conversion offers them a social and religious identity rooted in a personal faith in a loving God rather than in an identity that is dependent on one's social position or the recognition of higher castes. In the words of one of the converts who came to Christ in the early 1930s: "I wanted to become a Christian, so I could be a man. None of us was a man. We were dogs. Only Jesus could make men out of us."[42]

Nationalism

In India today, the ideologies of Vivekananda and Savarkar have become increasingly and unconsciously absorbed and enjoy a growing public impact. Indeed, the highest levels of government reflect their influence. Consequently, there are increasing demands on non-Hindus—particularly Christians and Muslims—to prove their devotion to the *maatrebhoomi* (motherland). Since the new Hinduism is now regarded as *the* religion of India with the exclusive authority to speak for all Indians, any conversion from Hinduism is a betrayal of the "motherland," a loss of one's Indian identity, and a threat to national unity. Referring to the Hindu nationalist family of organizations, which includes groups such as the RSS and Bajrang Dal, Ainslie Embree writes:

> National unity, they argue, means an integrated, homogenous society; and this can only be found by recognizing that Indian culture and Hindu culture are synonymous terms. This means, of course, that the place of the religious minorities is at once called into question, for the essence of Islam and Christianity—the belief in salvation through membership in a collective social body—seems to be a denial of national unity.[43]

The Hindu nationalist movement's emphasis on the acceptance of and tolerance for other religions by Hinduism is an essential aspect of their political ideology. Recalling Vivekananda's speech to the World's Parliament of Religions where he spoke of "tolerance and acceptance" of Hinduism, which is the "mother of all religions." By focusing on tolerance, the Hindu nationalist can effectively deny differences between Hinduism and other religious traditions and particularly between Christianity and Islam.[44] However, Hinduism, notes Embree, is neither truly tolerant nor gently absorptive:

> Political issues involving the rights of minorities were being obscured by the assertion that Hinduism was uniquely tolerant and willing to absorb other systems into itself.

> That the Islamic community in India wanted neither to be absorbed or tolerated seems to have occurred to a very few exponents of Hindu tolerance, but neither is it self-evident that Hinduism is tolerant and absorptive in the sense that has so often been claimed.[45]

In Embree's view, Hinduism's relationship to other religions is not one of liberal toleration or gentle absorption but rather one of "encapsulation."[46] By this he means that historically Hinduism has remained at its core relatively uninfluenced and unchanged by its encounters with other religious traditions and cultures. When a religious tradition such as Islam arrived in India, Hinduism encapsulated it—in the sense of enclosed and contained it—but remained the dominant and unchanging religion and culture within India. The implication is that Hinduism as the mainstream religious culture of India does not so much seek to foster a tolerant mutual understanding or co-existence with the religious Other as to dominate and colonize the religious Other within an overarching cultural and religious framework whose superior antiquity, wisdom, and tolerance all must accept without question. Indeed, this approach is even more domineering and effective precisely because it is carried on under the rubric of a professed, self-congratulatory tolerance and gentle absorption.

In fact, however, as Mahatma Gandhi himself illustrates, Hinduism displays a profound intolerance of those who seek to question and change their religious identity and tradition and to transcend caste and religious boundaries. This intolerance is something outcaste converts constantly discover and experience. If all this is true, then the compelling motivation of the BJP to win over the entire Christian Northeast is more than simply political. It is rooted in a deep desire to secure the wholesale and ultimate allegiance of a non-Hindu religious community. For the Hindu nationalists cannot accept that the non-Hindu religious identity of Northeast Christians as well as other Indian Christians—which revolves around a commitment to a God who is above and beyond the Indian nation-state and to a transnational community that is not circumscribed by the territory of Bharat

—is fully compatible with complete and proper loyalty as full citizens of the Indian nation. In a sense, then, the deeper Hindu nationalist objection to Christianity is not that it is geo-politically too "colonial" or neo-colonial or foreign. Rather, the objection is that Christianity is too culturally anti-colonial in that it refuses to be absorbed or encapsulated by neo-Hindu nationalism as a subservient internal colony. To put it another way, Christianity refuses to pay obeisance to the cultural metropole the Hindutva brigade aspires to construct.

1. US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2017 Annual Report*, released August 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf, accessed February 13, 2018. ↵

2. K. P. Manu, *Malabar Cements Ltd vs Chairman, Scrutiny Committee for Verification of Community Certificate*, February 26, 2015, Bench: Dipak Misra, V. Gopala Gowda, https://indiankanoon.org/doc/98912765/, accessed February 9, 2018. ↵

3. For more on the distinction between "religious" and "native" definitions of the term "Hindu," refer to Robert Frykenberg's *Constructions of Hinduism: At the Nexus of History and Religion* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2009). ↵

4. This categorization of Hinduism began in 1893 at the first World's Parliament of Religions, which took place in Chicago. To explore more of the origins and concept of "Hinduism" as a single world religion, see Richard King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" *Numen* 46, no. 2 (1999): 146-85. ↵

5. Frykenberg, *Constructions of Hinduism*, 525. ↵

6. Ibid. ↵

7. King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" 172. ↵

8. Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Moksha?" *Seminar*, no. 313 (September 1985): 21. ↵

9. King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" 173. ↵

10. Ibid., 172. ↵

11. Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003), 75. ↵

12. Ibid., 76. ↵

13. Swami Vivekananda, "Paper on Hinduism," first World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, September 19, 1893, http://www.viveksamity.org/user/doc/CHICAGO-SPEECH.pdf, accessed July 20, 2017. ↵

14. Frykenberg, *Constructions of Hinduism,* 523-50. ↵

15. Christopher A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 162. ↵

16. Beginning with the formation of the Arya Samaj in 1875, the Hindu Sabha in 1909, the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915, the Hindu Sanghatan in 1921, and finally the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 with its political wing, the Jana Sangh in 1951, a consolidated network of strident and secretive groups arose that exists to promote the ideology of Hindutva. ↵

17. Ashis Nandy, *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80. ↵

18. Ashis Nandy, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83. ↵

19. Sharma, *Hindutva*, 32. ↵

20. Ibid., 31. ↵

21. For more on motivating forces behind the work of Saraswati, Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and Savarkar, see Sharma, *Hindutva*. ↵

22. Nandy, *Creating a Nationality*, 83. ↵

23. Robert Eric Frykenberg, "Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 548. ↵

24. The concept of Syndicated Hinduism comes from Thapar, "Syndicated Moksha?" 14-22. ↵

25. Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Hinduism," in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 77. ↵

26. In this chapter the terms "outcaste," "depressed classes," and "untouchable" are used interchangeably. All these terms refer to a people who exist beyond the boundaries of a caste and who, despite legislation to prevent exclusion, remain on the margins of Indian society even today. ↵

27. G. A. Oddie, "Christian Conversion among Non-Brahmins in Andhra Pradesh: With Special Reference to the Dornakal Diocese, c.1900–36," in *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*, ed. G. A. Oddie (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 95-124. ↵

28. Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 185. ↵

29. Between 1930 and 1931, Bishop Pickett conducted a seminal study in collaboration with (and with the generous financial backing of) the Institute of Social and Religious Research. To date, Pickett's Study of Mass Movements remains the single largest database amassed on Dalit Christianity and its social and economic impact. For more information, see J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933). ↵

30. G. Arthur McPhee, *The Road to Delhi: Bishop Pickett Remembered, 1890-1981* (Bangalore: SIACS Press, 2005), 185. ↵

31. John C. B. Webster, *A History of Dalith Christians in India* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 23. ↵

32. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*. ↵

33. Ibid., 149.

34. For more on this issue, see Jack S. Blocker, *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989); Robert D. Woodberry, "The Origins of the Temperance Movement: A Comparative Historical Analysis," paper presented at the national meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August 16-20, 1996.

35. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*.

36. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 302.

37. M. Judith Brown, "Who is an Indian?" in *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire*, ed. Brian Stanley and Alaine M. Low (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 111-31.

38. Ibid., 125.

39. Harper, *In theShadow of the Mahatma*, 3.

40. Ibid., 249.

41. Rajendra Sharma, "Conversion Was Mother Teresa's Real Aim, RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat Says," *The Times of India*, February 24, 2015, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Conversion-was-Mother-Teresas-real-aim-RSS-chief-Mohan-Bhagwat-says/articleshow/46348555.cms, accessed February 8, 2018.

42. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements*, 36.

43. Ainslee T. Embree, *Utopias in Conflict: Religion and Nationalism in Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47.

44. Ibid., 23-24.

45. Ibid., 25.

46. Ibid., 24.