Hindu Fundamentalism
Intellectual Output 2, Unit V

Version No.	Author, institution	Date/Last Update
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Introduction

In the last twenty years, India has witnessed a steady growth of a nationalist religious movement appealing for restoration of the traditional values and culture of the Indian people.

Recent political events related to this 'Hindu revivalism" have shown that there are aggressive fundamentalist tendencies in India, insofar as these reformers are trying to establish a nation endowed with **a single, pure, political, cultural and religious identity, defined as Hindutva**, or "Hindu-ness". The word "Hindutva" generally refers to a Hindu nationalistic type of belonging, including several components: ethnicity, Hindu religious faith, and various factors of geographic and cultural order.

According to this religious and political ideology, India must be freed from Christian and - especially - Muslim cultural contaminations **to restore authentic Indian culture**. The aim of the political exploitation of Hindu religiosity, as happened in the case of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and in other Asian countries, is to create **a single Indian religious identity**. At the same time, according to some scholars, this ideology is also instrumental in **maintaining the economic and social disparities between the privileged classes and the poor classes**.

Nowadays, this ideology is gaining wide acceptance among the Indian people, although this phenomenon tends to be ignored by Western media, which do not give it the same visibility accorded to Christian or Muslim fundamentalism.

More information on:
What does "Hinduism" mean?
esp. paragraphs "Scientific denomination", "Origins" and "Main doctrinal tenets".

Buddhism and violence
paragraph: "Case study 3 – Buddhism and the collective identity in Sri Lanka"
paragraph: "Case study 4 – Myanmar, nationalism and Buddhist extremism"

Origins and development of the Hindutva

Several factors have led to the emergence of Hindutva's political ideology in India: first of all, the sense of insecurity perceived by members belonging to the Hindu ruling class under Muslim domination and during the period of British colonialism; they had felt politically and culturally threatened because Westerners criticized Hindu religion as superstitious. Together with the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries and the admiration of certain Hindu elites of Western culture, all these elements prompted Hindu orthodoxy to reform and redefine Hindu doctrines in order to face such challenges.

One reaction was an opening towards the West, exemplified by the so-called **Neo-Hinduism**, that stressed a mainly spiritual, intellectual and inclusivistic interpretation of traditional Hinduism, and minimized ritual and devotional components. **The other – opposite – reaction was a closure in front of alterity and a strong exclusivist tendency, arguing for the restoration and defense of the original character of India**, seen as a "holy land". Consider, for example, the case of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), who coined the word "Hindutva" in an ideological pamphlet entitled *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* published in 1923. Savarkar claimed that the Hindus share a homogeneous cultural identity and therefore constitute a Hindu state (*rashtra*) to be preserved and maintained.

More information on:
Modern and contemporary Hinduism
paragraphs "Neo Hinduism: modernity and inclusivism" and analysis of Source 1

Hindu fundamentalism: the historical and political background

In India, the rise to power of **Hindu fundamentalism** was the consequence of political and ideological developments in the last decade of the twentieth century, but its roots date more back in time.

After its independence in 1947, Indian politics stressed pluralism and secularism as advocated by the fathers of India like Gandhi (1869 – 1948) and Jawaharlal Nehru (1889 – 1964). It must be noted that secularism here must not be understood, like in France, as the exclusion of religious symbols from public life in order to confine religion to the private sphere. It entails an impartial treatment by the state towards all the different religious traditions of India, emphasizing unity in diversity.

Hindutva challenged this pluralistic and secular India. Already in 1925, the "National Patriotic Organisation" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS) was founded with the intent of uniting the Hindu community to form a Hindu *Rashtra* invoked by Savarkar. They grew exponentially, involving numerous sister organizations, like the more explicitly religious **World Hindu Council** (*Vishva Hindu Parishad* or VHP) and political parties, like the **Party of the Indian People** (*Bharatiya Janata Party* or BJP). They saw secularism as a cultural lease from Western society and, for this reason, considered it fundamentally different from Indian culture.

By the1980s, the key concept that the only true Indians are the Hindus was tacitly shared by the Indian middle class, although it was not officially considered a respectable idea. Only in the 1990s, these ideas were finally accepted by the Indian population, gradually substituting secularism, whose political and ideological decline was mainly due to some of its fundamental structural weaknesses (for example, the inability to defeat the scourge of illiteracy or the decision to favor capital-intensive and labor-intensive industries).

The underclass and middle class became the social sectors where these ideas took root and political Hinduism was more successful. In the 1980s the poorer social classes were mobilized through the spread of television in their villages and the immense success of **mythological telenovelas** based on the events narrated in the Hindu sacred texts, which helped to sensitize the population through political slogans referring to Hinduism. On the other hand, the middle class supported political Hinduism for different reasons: the limited earnings of secular politics ended up predominantly in the hands of the middle classes - an elite that corresponded roughly to one-sixth of the population – who justified their social privileges through the Hindu religion, according to which the upper classes, that is, in fact, the middle class, are rightfully entitled to leadership.

More information on:
Modern and contemporary Hinduism
paragraph "Hindu fundamentalism"

Religion and media
paragraph: "Case study - *Ramayama* and television in India"

The enemies of the Hindu people: Christians and Muslims

The fundamentalist ideology of India therefore advocated the maintenance of a substantially hierarchical society based on caste (**varna**); to obtain the consolidation of this political propaganda it was therefore necessary to identify **a common enemy that opposed the Indian cultural and religious identity and against which it was necessary to reunite the various social classes in order to combat it**. Muslims and Christians, as symbols of past foreign domination, fit well such a role. Moreover, another important aspect also concerns the growth of Islamic fundamentalism which, already from the times of the struggle for national independence, was an important factor contributing to the emergence of Hindutva ideology.

The persecution of Christians and Muslims – who had neither demographic, nor political, nor economic resources for self-protection - by organizations like the RSS, contributed to disrupting, on the one hand, the solidarity of the poorer social classes, on the other hand, offered the possibility of preying on the Muslim middle class that represented the most prosperous layer of the Indo-Muslim community, amid the indifference of the political ruling classes. These persecutions often follow quarrels over religious matters, such as the ownership of sacred sites.

However, these criminal actions, often carried out under the direct guidance of the leaders of the BJP party, were so excessive that they caused a setback: in fact, in the elections held in 1993, the party suffered a clear political defeat. From that moment the BJP party changed their political strategy: the extra-parliamentary forces of the RSS and others were put under the strict control of the BJP, which then began to propose itself as the only party able to save India from the inefficient government of the Congress Party, which at the same time was going through a deep internal political crisis. Finally, in the Indian press the label "Hindu fundamentalism" was replaced with that of "Hindu nationalism". These strategies, together with widespread consensus among the population on Hinduvta ideology, lead to the victory of BJP in the Indian general elections of 2014.

A Hindu priest performs *yogna* (a holy fire ritual) for a candidate of the BJP party. Author: Goutam Roy of Al Jazeera English. Source: Wikicommons

More information on:
Modern and contemporary Hinduism
paragraph "Interdisciplinary and intercultural information: Islam presence in India".
Source 2 "Understanding Gujarat violence" and relative analysis.

Hindu nationalism: some conclusive reflections

Even Hinduism, a complex and pluralistic religious phenomenon that subsumes various traditions in itself**, can undergo exclusivist and violent interpretations**, if the historical, social and cultural contexts push towards them. It must be noted, however, that the phenomenon of Hindu Fundamentalism **doesn't have an exclusively religious character**, since it includes also issues of general cultural identity, especially in relation with the past Muslim and Western domination. It can be labeled "fundamentalism", however, insofar as it **presupposes eternal and originally pure roots of religious-cultural identity**, that have been corrupted and need to be preserved, protected and repristinated.

According to Hindutva, India is the land of the Hindus and consequently, Hindu Indians who adhere to this ideology look at Indian Muslims and Christians as devoid of the right of being in the "holy modern India". In conclusion, Hindutva's political ideology is not a mere return to the traditions of India, but also a **re-elaboration of an ancient and complex culture, in the increasingly harsh confrontation with religious pluralism and globalization.**