

THE FORGOTTEN FUNDAMENTALISM

Hinduism and nationalism in modern India

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In surveying religious resurgence in the modern world and its effect on politics, it is certainly worth taking a close look at India, because up until the introduction of the modern nation-state, “Indian society ... many groups of people, who spoke different languages, belonged to different histories and practiced different religions, over a period of hundreds of years learned to live together and interact socially.”¹ After the withdrawal of Britain from India, India’s continuation of its quest for recognition in the modern world has led to repeated attempts to define itself as a nation-state in the world at large, and ever since the creation of Pakistan, religion has played a tremendous role in the ongoing process of politics in India. Although religion is extremely diverse in India—as the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—an examination of the role of Hinduism, as the largest religion in India, is crucial to an understanding both of Indian politics and is additionally important to wider theoretical questions regarding the varying role of religious resurgence in politics in the modern world. Of the approximately 800 million people living in India, 83 percent are Hindu, 11 percent Muslim, 2.6 percent are Christian, and 1 percent are Sikhs, with smaller communities of Jains, Parsis and Buddhists.²

The media has taken the term *fundamentalist* to heart in its discussions about the interaction between religion and politics in today’s world, but these discussions have concentrated on Islamic and Christian fundamentalists in the West and the Middle East and ignored the religious revivalism that is surging through much of the Far East. If the media can go so far as to apply the term fundamentalist to the vastly different Muslim and Christian movements, it can also certainly apply it to the Hindu militants who are rapidly organizing and deploying across the Indian subcontinent. Not to enter too far into a discussion of the merits of applying the term fundamentalist to various religious movements, it seems fair to say that when the term is used in the popular media, it generally refers to a religious movement which is concerned with expulsion of other religious groups, in an attempt to form a society based on the essential truths of one religion, and is not adverse to the idea of using extreme violence and terrorism to achieve those goals. Elements of modern Hindu movements certainly meet these requirements in their attempts to create *Hindustan*, the Hindu homeland.

It is even more curious for many observers that such elements should arise in Hinduism (relative to the monotheistic religions of the West), as the religion is perceived to be by nature more accepting of differences in beliefs. This however a misconception, as Hinduism certainly accepts a variety of deities, and has a great diversity within its won structures of yogic ideals, but the basic structures of *karma* (‘merit points’ gained for spirituality) *dharma* (duty), and sacrifice. Not to digress too far from the role of Hinduism in modern politics, a brief understanding of these concepts is necessary if one is to understand the role Hindus themselves feel they are playing in any context, including the political sphere.

The Indian Hindu has many ways of adhering to his *dharma* and achieving a level of *karma* that allows him to escape from this cyclical universe and move beyond the suffering of this world. These various methods of disciplining oneself are collectively referred to as *yoga*, a Sanskrit word meaning a discipline or spiritual path, in essence, a method of training designed to lead to integration or union, with 'god'. *Yoga* is somewhat of an ambiguous term, but can generally be broken into three main categories for the purpose of discussion.

Loosely defined, these three *yogas* are *jnana yoga*, *bhakti yoga* and *karma yoga*, and together these three disciplines offer various paths to the same goal, that of *moksa*, enlightenment and release from *karma* (death and rebirth) through a form of sacrifice. The paths vary in difficulty and in methodology, and although each is intrinsically valuable and sacred, there are differences in what might be termed the quality of each, in that those people of higher stations in life are presumed able to follow the more difficult of the *yogas*, thereby performing a somewhat 'greater' sacrifice.

There is a difficulty however, in discussing the sacrificial component of these disciplines in English, because the conceptualization of sacrifice for the Hindu is a much wider and deeper understanding of the term than that in Western, secularized culture. In order to more fully understand the role of these *yogas* as sacrificial in nature, one must first understand the disciplines themselves, which is somewhat impossible, as by their very nature they cannot be understood completely unless one undergoes the disciplines. They can however be looked at by examining certain characteristics of each *yoga*, and then attempting to relate each of these characteristics to sacrifice and in fact to life by means of comparing them to each other.

Jnana yoga, stated simply, is the way to achieve union with 'god' through knowledge. Although this knowledge is achieved through knowledge of the *Veda* (the religious texts of the Hindus), itself achieved through intense *Vedic* study to the exclusion of all things worldly—the true knowledge is not knowledge in encyclopedic terms, rather, it is intuitive knowledge of life itself. In Hindu understanding, this then would mean a realization and acceptance of the oneness of the universe, the overall similarity of reality, and a shift in rationale from self-centered world-view to a world-view that includes the concept of the human body as a microcosm of the universe, a universal fractal in Mandelbrot's terms, and also of the universe as a reflection of the human body, a macrocosm. As the *jnani yogi* (*yogi* - one who intensely practices *yoga* and is recognized as an adept) reaches the realizations and disciplines the body and mind, the *yogi* is producing heat in many forms, and this heat is a form of sacrifice. Also, the *jnani yogi* has sacrificed worldly possessions and entertainments to achieve this knowledge.

Karma yoga takes a different approach. Designed for those who are incapable of total renunciation of the world, *karma yoga* allows the practitioner to remain active in daily life, in fact, to become fully active in all possible ways, seeing life itself as a sacrifice. *Karma yoga* could be characterized as a way to reach union with 'god' through work. This work includes all normal aspects of being an active participant in daily life, but is also understood as fully practicing one's *dharma*. This concept of *dharma* is central to Indian life, as it dictates everyone's duty from the day they are born, according to their station in life and into what caste they were born. As their caste is in fact a reflection of the current state of their *karma*, by accepting the stage of life which he is at, the *karma yogi* works very hard at being the best he can be at that stage of life, in effect, burning up his old *karma*, and creating new *karma*. This act of burning up the old *karma* is seen as sacrificial in nature, and contributes also to the overall accumulation of good *karma* in all of reality, so it is in fact a sacrifi-

cial offering, that is to say, an offering which is sacrificial in nature in that it contributes not only to the good of the individual, but also to society and to the universe at large.

Bhakti yoga is sometimes referred to as the way of love. It is so called because this form of *yoga* essentially consists of incredibly intense worship of ‘god’, which in *bhakti yoga* allows the adherent to conceive of ‘god’ in a way that seems most appropriate to himself. In fact, to the *bhakti yogi*, a true practitioner of the stated goals and aims of Christianity would be seen to be following a path of *bhakti yoga*. This form of *yoga* dedicates all power to the ‘god’ which is being worshipped, and in return, as the intensity of worship and love radiate out from the heart of the *bhakti yogi*, the ‘god’ will eventually help the *yogi* escape from *karma*. This process of radiating love can also be seen as a radiation of heat, and therefore sacrifice. A key difference here is that in *bhakti yogi*, or *bhakta*, will not identify with ‘god’, and conceive there to be an underlying unity, but will in fact concentrate on the ‘otherness’ of whatever deity to which that individual is devoting himself.

There is in fact a fourth *yoga*, that of *raja yoga*, which is that process of physical posturing and meditation that is in effect a series of psycho-physical experiments on the individual’s body so often connected with the word *yoga* in western culture. It is important to understand that in Hindu cosmology, these varying methods of achieving enlightenment, or realization of the *Atman*, are not mutually exclusive. They can in fact be combined and act in concert to lead people down the path which is most suited for their temperament. *Jnana yoga* is thought of as the shortest path, but that is because it is the steepest. The other paths are just as valid, but are perhaps longer, but easier to follow. The Hindu realizes that the importance of each is the act of offering sacrifice in whatever method is most appropriate, for everyone is different, and need to have different ways to reach the same goals.

All of these *yogic* elements play a role in shaping Indian politics. To give one example, the leaders of the *bhakti* movement of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries consciously avoided politics, but they did so by ridiculing social rituals, and social positions. By doing so, they laid the groundwork for today’s political movements which argue for social reform, based largely on the spiritual reform called for by adherents of *bhakti yoga*.

Having put forth this framework for understanding the paths a Hindu can follow, it is important to understand that the vast majority of Hindus are actively following *karma yoga*, and perceive themselves to be fulfilling their *dharma* by participating in the daily life of the community. With the introduction of the nation-state by the British, that community has now taken on nationalistic overtones, and many Hindus feel that their community is the nation of India, and one crucial element of their *dharma* is to preserve and protect—through violence if necessary—the Hindu environment, wherein certain practices crucial to achieving *moksa* are left unchanged. One example of this is the practice of *sati*, the burning of a widow. On 4 September 1987 an 18-year old girl committed *sati* (sacrificial suicide) on her husband’s funeral pyre. The Indian government, following the British practice of outlawing *sati*, tried to have the *cunari* rite—a rite which bestows sacrilege on the *sati*—a sort of consecration of the suicide suppressed. A whole new organization—Sati Dharma Rakshak—was created to protest this governmental action, and 70,000 Indians marched in protest. Eventually, a political party was formed by this organization, which still puts forth candidates and effects the debates surrounding women’s issues in India.³

The most popular way of understanding religious politics in India is through the idea of communalism. Essentially, this means that groups of like-minded religious people formed political organizations within the secular framework, with policy ideals based on religious motivations of the

community from whence originated the political group. While there is no national religious party by name, all religious derived groups are nationalistic, in that they seek to create a homeland in which laws and legislation are formulated with an understanding of certain religious norms. This holds true for the Muslim League, the *Akali Dal* (“The Group of Immortals”—the Sikh separatist party), and the various Hindu organizations, including the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (“The All Hindu Conference”), and the Hindu *Mahasabha*.

The Hindu *Mahasabha* is perhaps the most affected of the Hindu groups by the concept of the nation-state, and by the events of partition, which gave the Muslims their own homeland in Pakistan, and the carving up of Punjab, giving the Sikhs an area to call their homeland (*Khalistan*). The *Mahasabha* has as its main goal the creation of a completely Hindu state, called *Hindustan* (Hindu homeland). In such a state, the *Mahasabha* believes that Hinduism will return its believers to a golden age, in which the main concerns of *dharma* and *karma* will be preeminent in daily life. However, the *Mahasabha* believes that the homeland in question is all of India, as determined by reference to time periods prior to the Mughal empire. References to *Akhand Bharat* (“Undivided India”) abound in their literature, and they are in fact pledged to attain the goal of *Akhand Bharat* by all legitimate means. Those means can be violent, if the occasion necessitates, as was the case in Ayodhya, which serves as an excellent example of how the *Mahasabha* operates, in accordance with its leader’s “clarion call” in 1938 to “Hinduize politics and militarize Hinduism”.⁴

In 1984, the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) called for complete Hindu control over all sites related to Hindu worship. Some of these sites, such as the temple at Ayodhya, have had mosques built over them during the period of Muslim rule. After extensive fighting, the government banned both groups from worshipping on the site. Repeated attempts by Hindu militants following the *Mahasabha* ideals—members of the VHP—to break into the temple resulted in the reopening of the site in 1986. This quickly resulted in further Muslim-Hindu clashes, and the VHP began calling for destruction of the mosque. In 1993, on 6 December, the riots broke out in force. Most Muslims fled the city, but Hindu militants captured the 13 Muslim men, women and children left in the area of Ayodhya, and burned them, after destroying all of the Islamic relics in the mosque and looting and burning all Muslim owned houses and shops in the area. A leader of the VHP, Acharya Dharmendra, was quoted as saying “This is the only way in which Ayodhya can become like the Vatican.”⁵ Such statements are echoed by Hindu militants around India, as they seek a normal nation for themselves, as they have seen the West set up for Jews and for Muslims.

Incidents such as those at Ayodhya are innumerable, but it is the motivation that is important, more than the events themselves. Each of the Hindus participating in these events sees himself as fulfilling his *dharma*, living the life of *karma yoga*, and pursuing an ideal environment, in which his path to *moksa* will not be hindered by secular governmental laws. Religion and politics are intertwined in India perhaps more than in any other nation, and inasmuch as efforts to force India into the role of a modern-nation state involve secular notions, there are perhaps insurmountable difficulties in attaining that goal. India thrived on communalism until the introduction of nation-state boundaries took away the validity of those communities, and the clash between modern nationalism and Indian communalism will always be expressed in religious terms, as that is the only route of expression available to Hindus who feel that their spiritual progression is threatened by the state. Not all of them, obviously, will join militant groups, but many will, and those that don’t join up will probably support the ideas expressed by the groups, without endorsing their actions. Hinduism is indeed ‘the forgotten fundamentalism’ in our Western debates over religious resurgence, forgotten perhaps because in India as nowhere else the action of the West are at the roots of the current violence.

suggestions for further reading

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notes

- ¹ Friedhelm Hardy, "The Classical Religions of India," p. 39, in *The Religions of Asia*, ed. Friedhelm Hardy, (London: Routledge, 1990), 37-128.
- ² Mark Juergensmeyer, "India", in *Religion in Politics: A World Guide*, ed. Stuart Mews (Longman: London, 1989), 98-107.
- ³ For a brief discussion of the *sati* of 18-year old Roop Kanwar, see Mark Juergensmeyer, "India", in *Religion in Politics: A World Guide*, ed. Stuart Mews (Longman: London, 1989), 98-107.

⁴ As quoted by Gavin Flood of University of Wales, Lampeter, in a lecture.

⁵ Shikha Trivedy, "The Followers of Godse", *Manushi* 79 (1994), 2.