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Indian Dalits and *Hindutva* Strategies

Seth Schoenhaus

The Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, is a right-wing nationalist political party charged by its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh (RSS), to spread its ideology of *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) through the political process.¹ In doing this, the BJP has gained national prominence, as seen most recently in its resounding 2014 victory in which Narendra Modi shot to power as Prime Minister of India.² However, the party has made itself into the stalwart political arm of India's burgeoning middle class: conservative, fairly wealthy voters who tend to see themselves as the backbone of India's emerging global might and economic prowess.³ In order to increase its share of power, the BJP and other *Hindutva* organizations have increasingly realized the need to reach out to Scheduled Caste voters, specifically Dalits: those who have largely existed at the bottom of the Indian caste system, below even those considered "untouchable."⁴ Dalits often find themselves on the fringe of acceptable Indian society due to their historically low caste position, so their receptiveness to *Hindutva* politics is quite curious.

In order to court Dalits, the ideological message of *Hindutva* has shifted, as has its dissemination among populaces that were not formerly receptive to its nationalist thrust. This paper examines the methods by which *Hindutva* activists and politicians have courted Dalit voters, specifically focusing on the appropriation of Dalit traditions, the *Hindutva* meta-narrative of Lord Ram, and the claiming of Hindu space. This examination takes place through the lens of a clashing of ideals, and will thus begin with an overview of *Hindutva* as a political and religious message, moving on to delve into the Dalit experience and collective identity.

Hindutva: The Ideology of a Hindu India

Badri Narayan, a professor of social anthropology and frequent political contributor to various Indian newspapers, characterizes *Hindutva* as a strain of "cultural nationalism ... based on the moral and cultural code preached by the ancient Hindu religious epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*."⁵ More

1 Radhika Ramaseshan, "The BJP and the RSS: Family Squabbles Turn Intense," *Economic and Political Weekly* 1, no. 1 (2013): <http://www.epw.in>

2 Ibid.

3 Sumit Sarkar, "Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva," in *Making India Hindu*, ed. David Ludden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 270-293.

4 Badri Narayan, *Memory, Identity and the Politics of Appropriation: 'Saffronisation' Among the Dalits of North India*, ISAS Working Papers (Singapore: Institute for South Asian Studies, 2015), 2.

5 Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 8.

specifically, one might discuss *Hindutva* activism in the context of Indian public culture, characterizing the ideology as a mix of the paternalistic and xenophobic sentiments expressed by conservative Indians as a result of a changing Indian society. As India has become a global powerhouse increasingly exposed to new ideas and practices, the political mobilization of lower castes and rising consumerism in the broader Indian sphere has “fractured social imaginings and notions of order and hierarchy.”⁶ As such, *Hindutva* activists and supporters share a general goal of asserting their Indian-ness (the meaning of *Hindutva*) through a sort of reclamation of their native homeland from those who would see it destroyed (thus destroying Indian identity itself).⁷ This has tended to create an “othering” process, often explained by *Hindutva* detractors as projecting imagined or otherwise inaccurate wrongs done to Hindus onto minority communities, thus creating racist sentiments based upon ethnicity.⁸

Supporters of *Hindutva*, though, characterize the ideology as a defense of the Hindu religion alongside a sober recognition of the threat that “outside” religious traditions, most notably Islam, pose. However, analysis of the Bharatiya Janata Party webpage entitled “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology” reveals a strong sectarian bent, referring to Muslims using words such as “barbaric,” “hordes,” “bloody,” and “unwilling to change.”⁹ As such, the overarching theme of *Hindutva* as the BJP perceives it is not only a rewriting of history with Hindus as the benevolent idealists and Muslims as the violent barbarians, but a generalization of who is “Muslim” and who is “Hindu.” In making these generalizations, one becomes aware of a theme central to the *Hindutva* idea: Hindu unity, especially across castes. The webpage makes no note of certain caste values, heroes, idols, or practices, instead discussing Hindus as an already unified group of people with similar viewpoints and like minds. While the significance of this imagined unity is discussed in greater detail later, we can note here that the notion of a universal Hinduism presents a great challenge to courting voters, such as Dalits, who feel they have been left out of the gains made by the modern Indian state. As such, the otherness heaped on to Muslims on the webpage has been extended to include those Dalits who have converted to Islam or other religions in protest of their poor treatment under the Hindu caste system. In fact, as *Hindutva* has flourished since the 1920s as an upper caste reaction to progress made by formerly oppressed

6 Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 8.

7 More conversation on the Hinduisation of space to come later in the paper.

8 Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), 1.

9 Bharatiya Janata Party, “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology,” Bharatiya Janata Party, last modified 2015, http://www.bjp.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=369:hindutva-the-great-nationalist-ideology&Itemid=501

groups, we can extend the overt fear of Muslims to cover an underlying fear of lower-caste Hindus as they mobilize and demand their equal rights under the secular state.¹⁰ Understanding Dalit identity, then, is key to an overall comprehension of the tactics used by *Hindutva* activists in gaining their support.

As a final observation concerning the BJP's depiction of *Hindutva*, one cannot fail to notice the narrative structure of the webpage entry. The very fact that the ideology is presented as a story, complete with moments in history during which Muslim invaders, such as the Mughals, attempted to destroy dharma, points to the greater Hindu tradition of imparting religious knowledge in the form of a story. In fact, an account of one scholar's experiences with a Hindu holy man led her to remark that storytelling is "an expression of deep-rooted cultural themes."¹¹ Folding this observation into an analysis of the BJP's explanation of *Hindutva*, one might surmise that the webpage is in the form of a narrative specifically to play to Hindus' feelings of cultural belonging, unity, and overall Indian-ness. Additionally, scholarly analysis of traditional Hindu storytelling techniques reveal emphasis on "characterization," or the incorporation of targeted audience members into widely-known folk stories in order to convey a pre-conceived message or idea about the general nature of something as it applies to the listener.¹² This point will also be vital to understanding the reasoning behind certain methods and techniques for *Hindutva* recruitment of Dalits, which this paper comes to later.

Who is a Dalit? Understanding Dalit Identity and Dynamics

The term *Dalit* means broken, oppressed, or ground down; it has been used in India's northern states since the 1920s but was not widely used until the 1960s, when radical groups such as the Dalit Panthers (a group modeled after the American Black Panthers, using militant ideology to assert their rights as a marginalized people) appropriated the term to assert their political standpoint.¹³ In practice, a Dalit is one formerly designated as an "untouchable," or one existing below the caste system, relegated to jobs and locales with diminished or non-existent ritual purity in a traditional Hindu context.¹⁴ There are several sub-castes within the broader Dalit fold, such as Pasi, Dhobi, Kori, and others, and divisions between these Dalit castes are often widened or traversed based on local and state-level

10 Kama Kellie Maclean, "Embracing the Untouchables: The BJP and Scheduled Caste Votes," *Asian Studies Review* 54, no. 4 (1999): 489.

11 Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 11.

12 *Ibid.*, 235.

13 Juned Shaikh, "Who Needs Identity? Dalit Studies and the Politics of Recognition," *India Review* 11, no. 3 (2012), 200.

14 Deepa S. Reddy, *Religious Identity and Political Destiny: Hindutva in the Culture of Ethnicism* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2005), 87.

electoral politics and other processes deciding balances of power.¹⁵ However, scholars of the past several decades have noted a shift within lower-caste dynamics in their observations of massacres of Dalits in the 1970s and 1980s: Dalit recognition of caste as an externally imposed force of organization on members of the lower echelons of society was simultaneously rejected and internalized. One literature review proves important in explaining this phenomenon: "While caste is practised and called upon to reassert dominance and power by the upper castes, it is also posited as a positive identity of a subordinated community of untouchable castes."¹⁶ Thus, we might understand the notion of caste division to Dalits as a historical roadblock to success and integration in society but also as a modern day tool for unification and political, social, and cultural power.

Dalit Unification: Challenges to Obtaining Political Power

This Dalit unification and pride in their cultural heritage has taken the form of a "racialization" of their caste identity and situation. As the Dalit Panther imitation of the American Black Panther Party was noted earlier, Dalit identity has been increasingly externalized as an ethnic or even racial divide between them and Hindus of other castes. Because of this, Dalits in recent years have delved into their communal histories, invoking experiences, myths, legends, heroes, and other forms of cultural pride in order to solidify their intra-caste solidarity.¹⁷ Though this paper covers this communal history and shared Dalit ideology more later, suffice it here to remark that Dalit identity has been shaped around communal discourse at small levels often confined to local and state geographical realms. As such, one examination of Dalit voting patterns revealed a plethora of local party allegiances without the presence of a unified, solid political front.¹⁸ The problem of translating cultural and historical identity into the greater political realm, then, has proved a challenge for the Dalit community in recent years, evidenced by the stratification within the greater Dalit caste as it pertains to economic success. As India has gained prominence in recent years in the global economy, groups and individuals from all across the caste system, not just upper-caste businesspeople, have seen their economic salience rise astronomically. In this context, some Dalits have become more successful than others, and one study examining electoral politics in India's majoritarian system concludes that income differences between groups, whether they are of the same caste or not, predicts differences in voting patterns

15 Shaikh, "Who Needs Identity," 203.

16 K. Satyanarayana, "Dalit Reconfiguration of Caste: Representation, Identity and Politics," *The Critical Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2014), 48.

17 *Ibid.*, 59.

18 Rahul Verma, "Dalit Voting Patterns," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009): 95.

and political allegiances.¹⁹ Because of this, higher income Dalits are likely to vote differently than lower income Dalits, and additionally will lean on their ethnicity as a specific group of Dalit to make their political decisions rather than their identity as a Dalit first and foremost.²⁰

With the formerly untouchable castes making up almost 20 percent of the population of India, they represent a large portion of the populace and thus have the potential to exercise considerable political influence. Most of these Dalits, though, are impoverished and weak as opposed to wealthy and middle class, and thus the notion of Dalit unification is still essential to their equality, dignity, and obtainment of rights. A central challenge to meeting these goals has been overcoming these internal divisions—a feat often agreed to have occurred under Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a strong leader advocating for Dalit rights in the years surrounding the creation of the Indian state.²¹ His central vision surrounded an annihilation of caste in a more egalitarian society, and although he eventually led thousands of Hindu Dalits in converting to Buddhism (as he concluded that Hinduism was fundamentally incompatible with equality and rights for the oppressed), he still remains a central figure and even folk hero to many Hindu Dalits today.²² However, some scholars have argued that since the death of Ambedkar in 1956, Dalits have lacked a unifying leader that claims to represent their caste as a whole, and have thus been susceptible to swaying from outside factions that may or may not adequately represent their interests.²³

In this context of economic advancement, social disunion, and a leaderless bloc, Dalits still attempt to drum up pride through the mining of their cultural icons, albeit at local levels. The next section of this paper examines the pragmatic (if not ideological) space this leaves for *Hindutva* leaders to court Dalits. This examination will take place through a cultural as well as physical lens.

The Hindu Nation: Appropriation, Metaphor, and the Politics of Representation *Ethnicization and Sanskritization*

The politicizing of Dalit collective memory is not a phenomenon confined strictly to modern Dalits. In fact, Christophe Jaffrelot notes that castes today are constantly regrouping themselves, taking on characteristics, and forming organizations in order to change their societal positions and climb the social (and

19 John D. Huber and Pavithra Suryanarayan, "Ethnic Inequality and the Ethnification of Political Parties," *World Politics* 68, no. 1 (2016), 149.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Sandeep Pendse, "The Dalits and Hindutva: Gainers and Losers," in *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis*, ed. Anand Teltumbde (Kolkata: Samya, 2005), 75.

22 Sumit Sarkar, "Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva," 293.

23 Pendse, "The Dalits and Hindutva," 89.

therefore economic and educational) ladder.²⁴ The so-called “subordinate castes’ revolution” has occurred mostly in the past three decades, in response to certain affirmative action policies passed in order to ensure the equal representation of Dalits and other low-caste individuals in Indian society.²⁵ Historically, though, caste grouping and mobilization has occurred since the time of the British Raj, when the census created more formalized caste hierarchies as well as the opportunity for social movement.²⁶ Significant pushback from upper-caste individuals was not seen at a high level until the 1980s and 1990s, notably with the prodding and support of *Hindutva* politicians, which led to a caste against caste mentality amongst many Hindus. Caste tensions and even warfare, while nothing new in Hindu society, were undoubtedly exacerbated with the affirmative action policies toward the end of the twentieth century.²⁷

In this climate of caste warfare, complete with the racial and ethnic identification of caste described earlier, it is important to understand the theoretical terminology behind caste mobilization, especially as it pertains to Dalits. Scholars tend to define certain caste actions as either “Sanskritization” or “Ethnicization.” Broadly, “Sanskritization” refers to a low-caste adoption of values or practices typically seen as upper-caste or Brahmanical.²⁸ Usually, this is undertaken with the aim of gaining acceptance among high caste members and therefore gaining access to the resources that come with membership in the upper echelon of Hindu society. In practice, this generally takes the form of low-castes collectively adopting vegetarianism or teaching Sanskrit in order to emulate upper caste practices.²⁹ In a broad context, however, many scholars have noted the inefficacy or even contradictory effects of widespread Sanskritization among low-caste groups. They note that while the intended effect among low-caste groups as a whole is to promote the idea of caste fluidity and the eventual breakdown of caste through the ease of social changes, an unintended consequence of such upward movement has been to solidify upper-caste values as *definitive* Hindu practices. Hindu identity in the context of Sanskritization, then, has been judged as valid or invalid based upon its subscription to the universal norm of Brahmanical values and ritual purity.³⁰ In effect, Sanskritization has “strengthened the Hindu hierarchic caste-based socio-cultural system.”³¹

24 Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste and Politics in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 487.

25 *Ibid.*, 497.

26 Christophe Jaffrelot, “Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization in India: Changing Identities and Caste Politics Before Mandal,” *Asian Survey* 40, no. 5 (2000), 757.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, 24.

29 Jaffrelot, “Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization,” 757.

30 Reddy, *Religious Identity and Political Destiny*, 87.

31 Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, 24.

However, caste associations under the British colonial Raj, and subsequently under the Indian state, have been increasingly separated, stratified, and secularized, as both of these administrative structures have struggled to reconcile caste-based inequality with preparation for and implementation of democracy. Jaffrelot argues that caste associations have increasingly behaved not unlike interest groups, with collective economic and social goals, and with the added identifier of race and ethnicity as touched upon above.³² With the negative effects of Sanskritization apparent to many struggling to achieve caste mobility or emancipation, a process of “Ethnicization” has occurred, involving “alternative nonhierarchical social imaginaries.”³³ These social imaginaries centrally involve questioning the hierarchy of the caste system, and therefore breaking from the traditional social consciousness of being at the bottom of the ladder and instead inventing a separate cultural identity and collective history.³⁴ While these inventions have taken on names such as “Non-Brahmanism” and “Dravidianism,” they generally involve the publication of caste histories and, at local levels, village or town elders imparting stories of caste heroes to younger members or even caste intermarriage.³⁵

Despite the rise of Ethnicization among Dalits and other low-caste groups, especially since the popularization of identity politics in part facilitated by Ambekar, many have argued that various forces inside and outside these low-caste groups have produced uncertainties and insecurities about their newfound identities. In researching these invented low-caste identities, many scholars and cultural commentators referred to village or town-level caste practices as “folk Hinduism,” thereby giving them the connotation of being less-than or inferior to Brahmanical Hinduism.³⁶ Whether intended or not, in the translation process occurring between the academic and broader communities, some critics argue that a notion of traditional Hinduism has been elevated even higher, to occupy some monolithic, Vedic, or traditional practice among high-class, wealthy, and elite Hindus. On the other hand, Hindus of lower castes who have undergone Ethnicization processes and have thus elevated aspects of their own cultural histories have been made to feel inferior.³⁷ With this in mind, along with the inevitable failure of the Ethnicization process to completely unify and immunize low-caste groups from the lure of upper-caste transformation, we can understand why many Dalit communities still desire acceptance from upper-caste Hindus. In fact, close readings of the oral

32 Jaffrelot, “Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization,” 758.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, 27.

36 Vineeta Sinha, “Problematising Received Categories: Revisiting ‘Folk Hinduism’ and ‘Sanskritization,’” *Current Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2006), 99.

37 Ibid., 100.

and written histories put out by low-caste groups in order to claim their cultural heritage reveal strong desires to be “appropriated into the upper caste dominated socio-cultural and religious order of north India by linking themselves with Brahmanical temples, rituals, gods and goddesses and also replicating many of them.”³⁸

Because of these lingering sentiments of Sanskritization, one can characterize the general nature of Dalit and low-caste communities as fragile and divided. With the simultaneous and opposing pressures to at once claim their cultural identities as well as subscribe to Brahmanical, upper-caste values, some see Dalit communities as floundering, passive, and open to exploitation, especially with the absence of a strong, unifying leader. The next section of this paper deals with *Hindutva* appropriations of Ambedkar and the nationalistic politicization of the fragile Dalit identity in their bid to win over the electorate. Mixed with this is a discussion of the national *Hindutva* metaphor involving Lord Ram and the effects of this metaphor on Dalit communities. Overall, the fragility of Dalit identities and stratification of Dalit communities, mixed with the enormity of the population in comparison to other sectors of Indian society, make Dalits a prime target for political targeting.

Hindutva and Dalits

Understanding the ways in which Dalit communities are simultaneously fragile and vital to political parties is essential to understanding the ideological approach *Hindutva* politicians take in their courtship of Dalit voters. In the socioeconomic context discussed above, one notices a certain clash of Dalit ideals, which tend to be more left-leaning or liberal, and *Hindutva* ideology, which tends to be supported more by upper-caste, middle class Hindus and is also more right-leaning. This section of the paper, then, discusses *Hindutva* methods of ideological reconciliation in the hopes of wooing Dalits.

Lord Ram and the Ramayana

Scholars note the widespread use of a particularly aggressive, masculine image of Lord Ram used by *Hindutva* supporters as a metaphor for an Indian national consciousness.³⁹ Specifically, Ram has been appropriated as an ideal picture of Indian culture: a “Hinduness claiming to encompass the authenticity and tolerance espoused by Gandhians as well as militant and martial traditions.”⁴⁰ In the *Hindutva* ideological paradigm, the state in which Ram exists, then, is referred to as *Ramrajya*, or an imagined Hindu utopia in which upper and lower castes exist to-

38 Badri Narayan, *Memory, Identity and the Politics of Appropriation: 'Saffronisation' Among the Dalits of North India* 1, no. 1 (2015), 9.

39 Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, 19.

40 Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 174.

gether in unity.⁴¹ It is easy to see the appeal this might have to lower-caste groups, and *Hindutva* forces have depicted Lord Ram as he is portrayed in the *Ramayana* as a symbol of unity through his use of helpers that are depicted as Dalits.⁴² This narrative is disseminated through various means but is particularly focused on Dalit communities that are engaged in processes of Ethnicization: the creating and dredging up of communal myths and cultural narratives seems to provide *Hindutva* activists with opportunities to inject nationalist rhetoric into these identities.⁴³ One example of this injection involves painting caste heroes as great defenders of India against historical Muslim invaders, thus aligning them metaphorically with Ram's helpers in the *Ramayana*.⁴⁴

Caught up in the *Hindutva* appropriation of Dalit collective memory is Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who, in the 1950s, led a mass conversion of Dalits from Hinduism to Buddhism. As many Dalits see Ambedkar as a caste hero, father, or even folk legend, he has become open to selective re-interpretation by *Hindutva* politicians. He is now marketed to Dalit communities as not necessarily anti-Hindu because of his conversion to Buddhism over Christianity or Islam, because, like other religious and cultural figures, *Hindutva* politicians have appropriated the Buddha as a Hindu figure.⁴⁵ His image is even further twisted to portray him as anti-Muslim and therefore as pro-Hindu, which most any scholar on Ambedkarism would note is misguided at best.⁴⁶ In making this designation, we understand the key Muslim-Hindu dichotomy created by Hindu nationalism, where to be Muslim is to be on one side of the conflict, and to be Hindu is to be on the other, without any room for nuance or reconciliation. This dichotomous designation also goes hand-in-hand with the *Hindutva* appropriation of Indian space, as we can see with the cult of Bharat Mata.

Hinduizing Space: A Tool for Hindu Nationalism

The image of Bharat Mata, or Mother India, has been used since the founding of the state of India to evoke nationalist sentiment in the context of Indian independence from colonialism.⁴⁷ However, Jaffrelot points to the increasing stigmatization of Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s (after years of mass Dalit conversions to Islam in protest of what they saw as the oppressive Hindu caste system), as well as the rise of sub-state Islamic extremist groups as contributing to a sense of Hindu

41 Narayan, *Memory, Identity and the Politics of Appropriation*, 9.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 10.

44 Ibid., 11.

45 Pendse, "The Dalits and Hindutva," 78.

46 Ibid.

47 Mclean, "Embracing the Untouchables," 496.

vulnerability.⁴⁸ This environment of religious tension, coupled with the Hindu nationalist sentiment (dating back to original texts by *Hindutva* founding idealist Vinayak Savarkar) of an Indian nation as one whose people subscribe to the “social laws dictated by Hinduism,”⁴⁹ produced a new image of Bharat Mata: a benevolent goddess, in the tradition of Saraswati or Lakshmi, signifying the deification of India itself.⁵⁰ This is tied to the *Hindutva* idea of “geo-politics as an afterthought:” the more than five thousand year history of Hinduism as continuing with the rise of the Indian nation-state, not as another religion existing within secular India.⁵¹ As Bharat Mata is mostly used as an ideological tool in nationalist discourse, some scholars see this phenomenon as independent of the physical land of India and solely as the “us versus them” sentiment that divides Hindus from Muslims.

However, acknowledgement of the spread of Bharat Mata as a physically worshipped Hindu deity lends reason to doubt the notion of *Hindutva*’s “Hinduness” as being solely ideological. Bharat Mata temples now exist in many diverse parts of India, and the looseness of the ritual practices involved in worshipping Bharat Mata invite involvement from people of all castes, not just Brahmin priests.⁵² As such, the worship of Mother India can take place virtually anywhere, at any time, and by anyone, and is thus used as a tool by *Hindutva* activists to show the Hindu unity and the melting of caste structures.⁵³ This allows Hindu nationalists to circumvent the issue of caste while simultaneously laying claim to India’s physical landscape (as Bharat Mata worship, along with Ganges worship, is acknowledged to be the deification of these physical entities), or perhaps more precisely, taking this landscape from Muslims who wish to claim India as their own.

We see this process of “Hinduizing” space through *Hindutva* claims to landmarks associated with their imagined Hindu histories, notably the Ram Setu bridge controversy and the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign in Ayodhya leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid temple in 1992. The Ram Setu controversy surrounded the government’s plan to develop the waterway between Sri Lanka and India for commercial shipping, in the exact same spot *Hindutva* activists claimed Lord Ram had crossed into Sri Lanka in the *Ramayana*. As such, *Hindutva* activists wanted the site preserved as a historical landmark such that “Congress⁵⁴ leaders

48 Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste and Politics*, 175.

49 *Ibid.*, 173.

50 Mclean, “Embracing the Untouchables,” 496.

51 Reddy, *Religious Identity and Political Destiny*, 179.

52 Mclean, “Embracing the Untouchables,” 497.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Cathal J. Nolan, 2002. “Congress Party (of India)” In *Greenwood Encyclopedia of International Relations*, Cathal J. Nolan. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. The Congress Party has been India’s dominant political party since independence from Britain in 1948 and was instrumental in achieving this feat. It has consistently had a nonsectarian, completely secular and even socialist agenda, even as its influence has declined with the rise of identity politics toward the end of the twentieth century.

[might not] deal a heavy blow to the collective Hindu psyche besides reducing a sacred epic that defined Hindu identity and nationhood for ages, to a mere work of fiction."⁵⁵ Conversely, the Ramjanmabhoomi riots of 1992 involved a communal Hindu riot surrounding the Babri Masjid mosque, built during the time of Babur supposedly on the site of the historical birthplace of Lord Ram. As such, Hindu nationalist rioters razed the temple, resulting in thousands of deaths and a national wave of anti-Muslim sentiment.⁵⁶

Both of these episodes indicate the appropriation of space, whether ideological or physical, into the Hindu fold. In terms of Dalits, though, these outbursts of "Hinduness," coupled with Bharat Mata worship, signify openings into the Hindu society they have for so long aimed at penetrating. These openings perhaps allow for the physical participation in a tangible "Hinduness," exemplified in another context by the physicality that is so important in Hindu worship.⁵⁷ As groups existing below the caste system and outside common society, Dalits have been increasingly flocking to the *Hindutva* message of caste unity, especially without a strong Ambedkar-like leader to remind them that the Hindu caste system and the upper-caste *Hindutva* supporters had oppressed them in the first place. Through the *Hindutva* ideology of xenophobia and dichotomous designation of Hindus as being against Muslims, scholars note that "the lack of pan-Hindu identity is effectively sublimated."⁵⁸ As such, the anger and victimization expressed by Hindu nationalist activists seems to act as a sort of Sanskritization tool for Dalits who feel the same way about the caste system: "the possibility of inclusion in *Hindutva* furnishes Dalits with solidarity, as they channel their feelings of marginalization into the popularized movement that *Hindutva* has become."⁵⁹

Conclusion: Comments on Othering and Suggestions for Future Inquiry

The effect of othering Muslims over low-caste Hindus seems to have brought many Dalit voters into the *Hindutva* fold, perhaps through the linking of anti-Muslim sentiment with high-caste values, creating a Sanskritization complex surrounding the othering of a group that is not Dalits. While this paper covers this topic, it should be noted that many factors, including individual *varna* politics, state-level policies, and the current political climate with the BJP as India's ruling party, play into this paper's conclusion. Additionally, a central question this paper has not covered is the effect of low-caste voters flocking to *Hindutva* politics on

55 Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste and Politics*, 308.

56 *Ibid.*, 176.

57 Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

58 Mclean, "Embracing the Untouchables," 504.

59 *Ibid.*, 505.

the upper-caste base of parties like the BJP peddling this ideology. Although Hindu nationalist ideology promotes the notion of Hindu unity, the caste structure is still very much a part of Indian society, so the actual effect of a pan-Hindu political party should be studied further. Therefore, an examination of current BJP policies is needed, alongside a historical analysis of the evolution of *Hindutva* (as it has been an established ideology for several decades). Scholarship in these areas should lend readers a more complete picture of *Hindutva* methods of recruiting Dalit voters. Another avenue for future inquiry involves the *yatra* traditions of religious processions and pilgrimages and how politics play into these displays of public religion. Authors such as Christiane Brosius address this topic in depth, and the bulk of scholarship on this topic suggests that the public existence of Hinduism in India provides a wealth of opportunities to advance political agendas.⁶⁰

Finally, a cross-cultural study of religious nationalism might assist scholars in viewing political climates and religious sentiments as intimately related, rather than separate fields of study. As examples such as *Hindutva* show, religion and politics are often inseparable. Given the rise of non-state actors operating in the name of radical Islam, the religious fundamentalism of the far right in American politics, and the religious xenophobia on display among the conservative parties of Europe, a greater understanding of this intersection will be vital to confronting the cultural problems materializing in our globalizing world.

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