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Purifying the Sacred: How Hindu Nationalism Reshapes Environmentalism in Contemporary India

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High Honors Capstone Essay
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Abstract: The transposition of the cultural, religious, and sacred onto physical geographies is practiced by humans everywhere as landscapes are canvases for meaning making and integral placeholders of histories. In the Indian context, this practice is distinct for several reasons. Scholars of Hindu traditions recognize that the place-oriented disposition and centrality of land to Hindu traditions and cultures is unprecedented and integral to identity formation in modern India. As India faces increasing environmental degradation, the preservation of “sacred geographies” is especially crucial to the identity of Hindu traditions. The rise of Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) political parties (e.g., the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) has heavily influenced the mapping of landscape as distinctly Hindu. By analyzing contemporary environmental movements in India and delineating Hindu nationalist histories and contemporary politics, this project claims that environmental work politicizes the landscape through a Hindutva framework in ways that shape environmentalism to prioritize geographical features tied to imagined Hindu pasts and futures that further a Hindu nationalist agenda.

Acknowledgements

In large part, I credit this project to my Dad who took me to Nepal at the age of twelve and introduced me to lifeways and religious practice vastly different from what I experienced growing up in a small town in New Hampshire. My ability to travel there spurred a great interest in South Asia which I continue to hold today. On a more tangible note, I must acknowledge the guidance from my capstone advisor, Professor Emilia Bachrach, who helped facilitate one of the most beneficial educational experiences for me as she continually pushed me and acted as an enthusiastic conversation partner and mentor throughout the entirety of the process. Professor Claire Robison, a former professor of mine at Lewis & Clark College provided me with my first academic contact with South Asian traditions, culture, and most importantly politics. Her patience for answering to my unending curiosity of contemporary India politics informed this project in a myriad of ways. Lastly, I'd like to thank my colleagues in Religion 401 and 402 and our professors, Corey Barnes and Margaret Kamitsuka, who worked to support me through this enriching process.

On August 15, 1947 India partitioned into two independent states: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Partition marked the independence of India from British rule, but along with decolonization came the process of bifurcation that required mass migration to fulfill the normative goal of creating Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority states as these populations did not clearly reside in the boundaries drawn by partition. The strife of mass migration spurred by the declaration of partition resulted in an estimated several hundred thousand deaths as millions of Muslims fled to the newly created Pakistan, and millions of Hindus and Sikhs to India.¹ Partition has been analyzed in terms of the two-nation theory, namely that Muslim and Hindu were the two primary identities in pre-Independence India which resulted in the founding of two nations that placed religion as the defining factor of nationality.² While the creation of India and Pakistan normatively relied on religious difference, the intention was not to create religious states, particularly in the case of India.

Since partition, India has existed as a secular state and is today the world's largest democracy consisting of 1.3 billion people with 80% of the population identifying as Hindu.³ In the country's constitution, the Preamble states: "We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, *secular*, democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens..."⁴ Furthermore, India's first prime minister and eminent figure in the

¹ The estimated number of deaths from Partition is highly contested and political. The generally accepted range is between two-hundred thousand and two million casualties. This estimate falls on the lower side, see Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. 1st ed. Vol. 7. (Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68.

² For more on the two-nation theory and how it fueled and grew theoretically out of Indian partition, see Shaukatullah Ansari. *Pakistan - the Problem of India* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Public, 1997)

³ Conrad Hackett . *Population Growth of the World's Largest Religions in India*: Pew Research Center, 2015.

⁴ [Amendment] Constitution of India. Amend. XLII. Sec 2.

independence movement, Jawaharlal Nehru, spoke on the matter: “We talk about a secular state in India.... Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct... it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities.”⁵

Despite the foundation of secularity during the process of statecraft, currents of Hindu nationalism have been central to the construction of modern India as an independent state.

Today, when looking at the Hindu nationalist rhetoric utilized by the nation’s ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) it is hard to decipher what being “secular” means to the people of India. A clear hierarchy of religious dispositions occupies the public sphere in a way that many feel contradicts and compromises the secularity of the state as articulated in the constitution and stands as an antithesis to Nehruvian Secularism, and the egalitarian intentions of independent India regarding religious difference.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is emblematic of the threat to secularism and represents the contradiction of a constitutionally secular state being governed by a religiously affiliated party. As a member of the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party, he carries religious ideals and dogma into the political arena in very overt ways. The party practices Hindutva,⁶ or “Hinduness”, which, in short, conflates Indian identity and selfhood as inherently Hindu.⁷ Over the past several decades, as Hindutva becomes increasingly affiliated with state politics, the rhetoric is also

⁵ Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

⁶ The term Hindutva was coined in the 1920’s by an incarcerated Hindu politician who was writing in the context of British Imperialism and understood Hindutva to be a central political tool to unify the Indian, namely Hindu, population to overthrow the Raj. See Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva; Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969)

⁷ Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003)

becoming commonplace in everyday language in India. The rise of Hindutva works bilaterally: it is being carried out in very overt ways by the federal government under the leadership of Modi, but it is also perpetuated by a majority of the population that has come to identify with these political positions. Thus, both government and citizen actors co-create contemporary Hindutva sentiments and contribute to the polyvocality of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India.⁸

While there are many ways in which Hindutva politics are played out in the Indian government and in the public sphere, an increasingly urgent concern for Hindu nationalists is the “natural”⁹ environmental — a concern that is articulated through a distinct discourse of environmentalism. Environmental work, akin to other contemporary issues in India, is not exempt from the mark of Hindutva. To make sense of this relationship between Hindutva and contemporary environmental discourse (and action), I examine the nuances of the BJP’s political rhetoric specific to environmental campaigns in India (e.g., the Namami Ganga campaign) in light of broader discussion related to religion and ecology and sacred geographies in India. I argue that in contemporary India, Hindutva has entered the realm of environmental work, uniting religious nationalism with the “progressive” goal of local climate change activism. More broadly, as India is ruled under an ideology of Hindu nationalism the landscape of the

⁸ To clarify, I am stating that the rising of Hindutva is not a political ideology solely disseminated from the government to the people, rather it is something that works bi-directionally and dialectically between the government and people. Like any democracy, the Indian electorate elects their officials and the political views of the elected officials correspond to the interests of the people. Akin to other political ideologies, it does not disseminate from a singular voice, but is a polyvocal product reflecting a large mass of ideas, voices, and politics.

⁹ “Natural” and “nature” are understood as very fluid, multivalent nouns in the context of this project. In the environmental humanities, the terms “natural” and “nature” are often placed in quotations because they are understood as highly constructed and representative of a somewhat non-existent, or unattainable reality. In this case, “nature” is understood to have a close relation to Hindutva and to a certain extent Hindutva is understood as “natural” to the subcontinent.

subcontinent is politicized in exclusionary ways that articulate a sense of Hindu territoriality over the land. This political rhetoric has fundamentally shaped how environmental work is conceptualized in India. Therefore, while Hindu nationalist-inspired environmentalism attempts to serve the end of protecting the environment and mitigating ecological destruction, it also transforms environmental work into a method of advancing the Hindutva political agenda.

The convoluted interplay of Hindu nationalist politics, ecology, and religion is a core axis of this thesis. The phrase “Hindu nationalist ecology” will serve as a metonym for the complex relationship between contemporary environmentalism and Hindu nationalism. With the use of this term, I seek to illuminate the ways in which Hindu nationalist rhetoric espouse Hindu cultural supremacy and consciously and unconsciously weaves a Hindu nationalist worldview into ecological initiatives. Hindu nationalist ecologies illustrate how the impact of Hindu nationalism pervades more than electoral gains and manifestations of communalism, but also as an ideology manifesting on a more macro level in the form of environmental political discourse. Additionally, this term reflects the political goal to demarcate the land as belonging to imagined Hindu histories and futures. By laying claim to certain ecologies they simultaneously posit the dominance of Hindu nationalism; therefore, “Hindu nationalist ecology” takes on a meaning of a Hindu right to the land.

Methodology

As a student of both religious studies and of environmental studies, I came to this project seeking to incorporate work from both disciplines. I locate my project in the context of India, specifically Northern India. In part this is due to the significance of North India’s widely acknowledged sacred geographical sites, including the Ganges River and the city of Varanasi

which lend themselves to my consideration of how environmentalism and mythical histories of the landscape are intertwined in robust ways.¹⁰ Additionally, India is a nation central to any discussion of global climate change given its immense population and position as a developing nation. The goal of this capstone is not, however, to interrogate the degree to which India as a nation or “Hinduism” as a religion are ecologically friendly, or to serve as a mere critique of Hindu nationalism. Rather, the goal is, on the one hand, to illuminate how Hindu nationalist narratives are used as rhetorical and discursive tools to enact environmental initiatives and on the other hand, to question how environmental work is used as a vehicle to further a Hindutva agenda.¹¹ More specifically, I will examine how Hindu nationalist ideology has taken up the “ecological question” and posed it in terms of purity and pollution of specific features of the natural landscape as well as the purity of the culture of the nation. The core question guiding my project is: How have contemporary environmental campaigns in India been shaped by Hindu nationalist rhetoric and furthermore what are the implications of using communalist language in taking up the ecological question?

¹⁰ The Ganges River Basin is referred to by some as the cultural and political hearth of the nation. See Sya Burya Kedzior, "Ganga: The Benevolent Purifier Under Siege." *Nidan* 26, no. 2 (December, 2014): 21.

¹¹ I do not find myself in a position to subscribe a solution to or directly address the formation of a Hindu nationalist ecology, however I do think the implications of the phenomenon lie in underpinnings of xenophobia and cultural supremacy. My project seeks to illuminate that, however given my positionality as a white cis-male Western-educated student who is removed geographically from this particular context in India, I do not find myself in a position to speak for or on behalf of those belonging to Hindu nationalist ideology or conversely those who do not fit into the normative vision of the Indian nation as posited by Hindutva.

This project is informed by the conceptual framework of Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" (1967), which posits the concept of "religion and ecology."¹² This term introduces the idea that religion and religious dispositions can be utilized in a way to advocate for environmental amelioration and sustainable practice. However, research on contemporary environmental campaigns in India altered my understanding of religion and ecology fundamentally. While Hindu nationalists are advocating for environmental work through a "religion and ecology" framework, namely using religious texts, practice, and beliefs to support environmental work, the form of religion and ecology in India takes on another dimension: that of Hindu cultural superiority and communalism.

The crucial dimension of Hindu nationalism in religion and ecology discourses in India transitioned my primary focus from one of religion and ecology to one that places primacy on political discourse in contemporary India, specifically the development of Hindu nationalist ideology and its relation to land.¹³ Focusing on a contemporary phenomenon, I have drawn from historical materials that inform how a contemporary Hindu nationalist ecology has formed and continually evolves.

One of the few scholars who interrogates the connection between Hindu nationalism and environmentalism is Mukul Sharma, an award-winning New Delhi-based journalist-author-activist. Due to the limited scholarship on the topic, this project is heavily informed by the work of Mukul Sharma's book *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental*

¹² The concept term "religion and ecology" is developed in Whites' work and he is seen as the founder of religion and ecology, which is now a highly interdisciplinary field of study. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207

¹³ I do not intend to conflate Hindutva with "Hinduism" and therefore, I move away from a direct analysis rooted in religion and ecology. The focus transitions to discursive political analysis that is rooted in Hindutva deployments of Hindu religious scriptures and histories.

Politics (2012).¹⁴ Sharma's work focuses on how right-wing organizations have taken green perspectives and developed environmental politics, namely how biological and ecological justifications and right-wing politics act reciprocally to support one another. He focuses on India because of his familiarity with contemporary India and because he sees India as a clear example of how right-wing environmentalism has emerged on the global stage. My project is akin to Sharma's work in that it similarly looks at Hindu nationalism and a development of an environmental politic. However, unlike Sharma, I focus my research through a religion and ecology framework and elucidate how sacred geographies act as a core force in these discussions. Additionally, I focus on the BJP specifically. Furthermore, the vast range of sources that I have considered here — ranging from sociology of religion to environmental discourse— offer a distinct set of background sources from those Sharma engages with.

Given the geographically situated nature of this project and the varying perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds that it draws upon, I conceptualize my capstone as grounded in cultural studies.¹⁵ Therefore, methodologically speaking, my project is dynamic and interdisciplinary and recognizes how political, religious, environmental and cultural lenses are not discrete, but are rather entwined and act in relation to one another to construct the worlds we create and inhabit. Another crucial tenet of my methodological approach is the importance of the construction of place on both temporal and spatial axes. Situated in contemporary India, this project arises out of a particular social and historical context which informs the place, a core aspect of cultural

¹⁴ The seemingly small field of scholars focusing on Hindu nationalist environmental politics served as an advantage because it allowed me to posit an original argument. A difficulty of the lack of scholarship on the subject is that I had few voices to draw from and synthesis.

¹⁵ Credit to Professor Margaret Kamitsuka who identified and put a name to the methodological approach of my project. See "Cultural Studies," last modified August 8, 2016, [https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/cultural-studies.](https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/cultural-studies/), accessed March 7, 2018.

studies.¹⁶ The “situatedness” of this project to use the words of Donna Haraway, provide more nuanced, accurate claims as opposed to universal and objective claims.¹⁷ Employing the situated approach, I am careful to introduce the reader to the rich, nuanced milieu in which a Hindu nationalist ecology has formed before performing a discursive analysis of Hindutva political rhetoric.

Outline

This capstone begins with a section titled, “Religion and Ecology”, which acts as a theoretical frame for this capstone, positing that religion and religious worldviews can contribute to environmental discourse. Discussion of Lynn White’s “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (1967) occupies a majority of the section, where I present a core conceptual argument that religious beliefs influence how humans treat the non-human world. This concept is examined in the context of a praxis that has arisen in more contemporary environmental thought as a potential paradigm to reorient human conceptualizations of the environment. This section provides crucial framing for my examination of the connection between Hindu religious worldviews and environmentalism.

In the following section, “Hinduism and Ecology,” I hone in on the importance of physical landscape in Hindu traditions. Diana Eck’s *India: A Sacred Geography* (2011) offers a robust historical analysis that examines how Indian sacredness is not grafted on to India by

¹⁶ An aspect of cultural studies that I find implicit to my project is an analysis of power. I do not investigate overtly the power dynamics between Hindu and other non-Hindu religious groups in India, but the topic is implicit in discussions of communalism and the political power of Hindu nationalist dating back to pre-independent India.

¹⁷ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (NY: Routledge, 1991), 191.

western scholars, but is rather central to India's mythological understanding of the nation. Eck traces the history of sacredness back millenniums to demonstrate how the sacrality of the Indian soil is not a new phenomenon. I introduce Eck's research to illuminate the importance of religious dispositions and Hindu cultural histories in the understanding of the land in India; or in other words, how the land is sacredly legitimized and conceptualized. I then move on to the work of another prominent contemporary Hindu studies scholar, David Haberman, who examines in his book, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of North India* (2006), the tension between ideas of religious purity of the river and the reality of an exceedingly polluted river. Haberman deploys a religion and ecology framework to examine how premodern texts and Hindu mythological stories interact with efforts to protect to ecology of the river today.

In the "Hinduism and Ecology" section, the discussion moves beyond a mere analytical framework that explicates the relationship between Hindu traditions and connections to the land. The work of Eck and Haberman provide a crucial antecedent to understanding how the sacred nature of the Indian soil is used and politicized by right-wing Hindu nationalists. To illustrate the ties between territory and religion I look at Indian sacred geographies and contemporary Hindutva politics to examine the so-called Ram Janmabhumi ("birthplace of Lord Ram) movement. Starting in the 1980's, this movement mobilized Hindu nationalists political leaders and their sympathizers to demolish a 16th-century mosque and to reclaim the location as what they believed to be the birthplace of the popular Hindu deity Ram. The Ram Janmabhumi movement transitions the capstone from an analysis of sacred geographies and religion and ecology frameworks to a more focused discursive analysis of the environmental politics of the contemporary Bharatiya Janata Party. My goal here is to demonstrate how acts of communal

violence are not disparate from a BJP environmental politic given that they rely on the same theoretical underpinnings of a Hindu cultural supremacy.

In the following section, “Hindu Nationalism and a Formation of an Environmental Politic,” I further integrate the relationality between environmental work and Hindu nationalist ideologies. I introduce the metonymic terms green (read: environmental/ecology) and saffron (read: Hindutva) and delineate their interrelatedness. Mukul Sharma’s research is central to this section as his work developed the use of these metonymic terms and furthermore provides a nuanced analysis as to how “green and saffron” are co-creators in contemporary Indian politics and have come to rely on one another in the formation of a Hindu nationalist ecology. I re-introduce the term “Hindutva” and its complex historical significance beginning under the British Raj to its communal connotations today. I seek to illuminate how Hindutva ideology in many ways follows the narrative of sacred geographies by linking the Hindu people to the land of India, positing that the land of India as one for Hindus only. Or, in other words that Hindus are “natural” to the landscape. This proposition is used by Hindu nationalists through the language of sacred legitimation linking cultural purity with ecological purity.

In the final section, “Greening of Saffron: Contemporary Environmentalism in India” I analyze the BJP’s 2014 Election Manifesto and the National Mission for a Clean Ganga Campaign (Namami Gange) to further illuminate not only the formation, but also the practice of a Hindu nationalist ecology. In some respects, the campaigns that inform this discussion are my core primary sources and the discursive analysis and historical background that comes prior develops the argument and provides a framework for analyzing the campaigns. I examine the rhetorical devices of these campaigns to support my argument with empirical evidence.

In pursuit of my primary question for this project — how have contemporary environmental campaigns in India been shaped by Hindu nationalist rhetoric and furthermore what are the implications of using communalist language in taking up the ecological question? — each section of the capstone contributes to my observations on Hindu nationalist ecologies. Hindu nationalism has forged a bond with Indian environmental politics. More specifically, Hindu nationalist ecologies politicize the landscape of the subcontinent in exclusionary ways that articulates a sense of a Hindu belonging to the land. While the environmental campaigns of the BJP are received in vastly different ways than explicit instances of communal violence that often make headlines, Hindu nationalist ecologies are, I maintain, a manifestation of a similar communal nature of Hindutva politics on a macro level of environment-political discourse.

Religion and Ecology

Environmentalism is often regarded as a set of concerns and actions that use scientific methods to address environmental degradation. According to dominant paradigms in environmental studies, if scientific advancement, the Industrial Revolution, and development of fossil-fuel burning technologies aided to create our current crisis, then science could supply answers, helping to mitigate our ecological crisis. However, approaches to environmental work are highly diverse and interdisciplinary, and perspectives from humanities serve a vital role. In studying the environment, the understanding that the non-human world does not stand alone, but rather fundamentally entwined with and can only be understood in relation to economics, culture, and religion is essential.

I am especially concerned with how religion is positioned in relationship to the non-human world, and how approaching religion and ecology might allow us to think about the

environmental crisis that in a way that moves beyond merely examining the effects of our human consumption, to examining more broadly the ways in which humans conceptualize the environment to begin with. I am furthermore interested in what it means to approach the ecological question as a religious question that seeks religious answers. While using religion as a tool to combat environmental degradation is not prevalent in mainstream environmentalist movements, the approach has idea has garnered some attention over the past several decades. As early as 1987, for instance, the United Nations published a report entitled *Our Common Future*, which poses religion as a possible solution to the environmental crisis stating:

Sustainable development requires changes in values and attitudes towards the environment and development requires changes in values and attitudes towards environment and development- indeed, towards society and work at home, on farms, and in factories. The world's religions could help provide direction and motivation in forming new values that would stress individual and joint responsibility towards the environment and towards nurturing harmony between humanity and environment.¹⁸

The United Nations declaration that religion “could help provide direction and motivation in forming new values” towards the environment is not as concrete as calling for the implementation of renewable energy, or a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions; rather it posits that religious frameworks are fundamental in conceptualizing one’s world and that religious worldviews play a major role in shaping human attitudes toward the natural environment. Religion can function as a solution that seeks to change the way humans conceptualize and therefore interact with the environment. This articulates my core conceptual argument that religious worldviews influence particular beliefs, practices, and interactions regarding the nonhuman world. This argument will be applied specifically to the contemporary rhetoric of a

¹⁸World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 95.

Hindu nationalist ecology to discern how in this situated context religion and environmental work are intertwined.

Lynn White, a scholar of medieval Christianity, examines the field of study that first considered the relationships between religion and ecology in a 1967 edition of *Science Magazine* titled “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” His contentious argument in *Science Magazine* fostered an emergent discourse around the relationship between religious studies and environmental studies.¹⁹ Studying Western Christianity’s development of scientific technology in the Medieval period, White critiques Christianity’s relationship to the environment.²⁰ Religion has the power of shaping our worlds— from the way humans conceptualize the forest to what happens to a human after death. White believes this shapes our ecology: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny — that is, by religion”.²¹ White articulates a foundational idea to the field of religion and ecology— that religious beliefs influence human treatment of the natural world; therefore, our problem is foundationally a philosophical problem.

On a metaphysical level, White’s interpretation of Christianity articulates that it is a religion of dominion, which can be seen in the very act of humans naming all the animals to

¹⁹White’s thesis is prevalent in any work on religion and ecology. While his argument regarding Christianity as the “most anthropocentric religion” (1205) is contested, his thesis that religious worldviews influence our conceptualization of the natural world is widely accepted and is the cornerstone of religion and ecology. See Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207.

²⁰ The very nature of White’s approach in using the term “Western Christianity” is devoid of context and he writes on behalf of the whole faith which is problematic. Nonetheless his scholarship has merits in that it highlights main dogmatic doctrines that illicit poor ecological consciousness.

²¹ White, “The Historical Roots,” 1207.

establish dominance over them.²² More specifically, White argues that environmental degradation grew out of Western technological and scientific advancements made by Christian societies in the Medieval period. Beyond this, he proclaims that Christianity is the “most anthropocentric religion in the world.”²³ While White’s thesis has been subject to many debates, the tenet that continues to be central to scholarship in religion and ecology is that all religious conceptions (cosmology, ethics, parables) do fundamentally influence human’s relation to the nonhuman world. White, similarly to the United Nations *Our Common Future* report concludes by suggesting that “more science and more technology are not going to get us out the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or re-think our old one.”²⁴

White sees the problem of how our modern ecological crisis as fundamentally a philosophical problem of how humans view the natural world. Thus, the problem of prioritizing humans over “nature” and degradation will not be solved by new science and technology: humans must rather adequately re-orient their relations to the nonhuman world. Because Christianity was the initial subject studied by White and others’ criticism in the burgeoning field of religion and ecology, some have assumed that the lack of discussion around non-Christian religions, particularly Asian and Native American traditions, indicate that he assumes that these traditions posit environmental neutrality, or that they construct inherently less detrimental worldviews and practices.²⁵

²² Contrasting Christianity’s destruction of European Paganism, its predecessor White states, “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.” *Ibid.*, 1204.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1205.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1207.

²⁵ I return to this point later in the capstone. Examples of those who contest White’s formulations include, J. Baird Callicott ‘A NeoPresocratic Manifesto’, *Environmental Humanities*, 2 (2013): 169–186; Mary Evelyn Tucker, ‘Religion and Ecology: Survey of the Field’, in *Gottlieb, R. S.*

More recently, however, the field of religion and ecology has engaged with all of the world's major religions. Theologians and activists who agree with the inherent connections between religious and ecological disposition are engaging in efforts to rethink current traditions and formulate new understanding of human's relationship with the nonhuman world in light of the ecological crisis.²⁶ The work to engage with the environmental crisis utilizing religious frameworks is known as the "greening of religion."

Those who work to "green" religion, posit that religion has the potential to mitigate our environmental crisis and that religious actions can be grounded in environmentally conscious beliefs. Therefore, the greening of religion allows some practitioners to critically reflect on and re-interpret their practice vis-a-vis an ecological perspective. The greening of religion often manifests in the application of a "green hermeneutic" to sacred texts. This so-called greening of religion is not, however, so simple. No single religious tradition is independently equipped with the tools to solve our current environmental crisis. As Poul Pedersen states, "No Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic scriptures contain concepts like 'environmental crisis,' 'ecosystems,' or 'sustainable development,' or concepts corresponding to them. To insist that they do is to deny the immense cultural distance that separates traditional religious concepts of the environment from modern ecological knowledge."²⁷ According to Pederson, efforts to "green religion" start

(ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 398–418. To see a large overview as to how White's thesis has reverberated in the fields of environmentalism, medieval studies, and religion and ecology, see, Elspeth Whitney. "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years," *History Compass* 13, no. 8 (August, 2015): 396-410.

²⁶ See, for example: Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) or the work of the Sankat Mochan Foundation in Varanasi, India.

²⁷ Poul Pedersen, "Nature, Religion, and Cultural Identity: The Religious Environmental Paradigm," *Asian Perceptions of Nature* (1995): 262. Pederson also cautions us to avoid

with the conviction; that scriptures do not prescribe how to respond to the ecological strife, but that ecological ethics must be construed through hermeneutical readings of texts.

An example of such a “green” reading can be seen in the work of Lance E. Nelson, a Hindu studies and ecology scholar, who applied a green hermeneutic to a reading of the classical Hindu text, the *Bhagavadgita*. Nelson believes that as our ecological crisis heightens, “We cannot avoid the need to examine the fundamentals of religious worldviews to determine their impact on ecology. This means that the basic categories and deep structures— along with primary scriptures— cannot remain immune from the questioning process.”²⁸ Nelson’s reading of the *Bhagavadgita* highlights perspectives that could lend significant support for ecological consciousness. However, his reading also could be received as highly problematic to some Hindus because the application of a green hermeneutic relies not solely on finding ecological positives of a text, but also reinterpreting or reconstructing a text in light of the ecological. Therefore, constructing such green hermeneutics is potentially contentious. Furthermore, linking scriptural interpretations to environmental activism often conceptualizes the work within a particular religious worldview which may not agree with others beyond one’s own religious tradition.

Often religious-motivated environmental activism occurs with, and in conversation with, the re-conceptualization of scriptural sources. In March 1973 in the north Himalayan village of Gopeshwar, for instance, plots of land were being auctioned off to logging contractors. When

conflating values and norms as directly determining behavior. Humans are complex and values and norms do not always translate into behavior that reflects those values, therefore it is important to compare how values and behaviors correspond.

²⁸Lance E. Nelson "Reading the Bhagavadgita from an Ecological Perspective," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, edited by Chapple, Christopher and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 109.

loggers came to cut down the trees, the local people protested. Deforestation in the region was already compromising the lifestyle of local residents as firewood and other subsistently harvested resources were eradicated by logging companies. The locals, a group of *adivasis*²⁹ (indigenous peoples), began to hug the trees to prevent the lumber workers from logging. This came to be known as the Chipko movement (Chipko means to “hug or embrace” in Hindi).³⁰ The Chipko movement protested neocolonial capitalism, a form of economic structuralism that ravages resources of the so-called Third World to sell goods in foreign markets. This movement eventually spread beyond this *adivasi* community to other areas and became one of India’s most influential environmental movements. The Chipko movement is classified as a form of the greening of religion in its frequent use of Hindu scriptures that posit the protection of all forms of life.³¹ The movement brought awareness not only to deforestation but also to water conservation, mining practices, and other industrial influences. The Chipko movement employed

²⁹ *Adivasi* is a category constructed by the Indian government meaning “backward Hindus,” who are viewed as subaltern within caste system. This community is systematically oppressed and marginalized by the government through law, policy, and economic development. Due to their place in the social milieu, *adivasis* in general, and this community in Gopeshwar are/ were unfairly targeted by development schemes due to their lack of federal protections. See George A. James, "Ethical and Religious Dimensions of Chipko Movement," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, edited by Christopher Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)

³⁰Ibid., 500.

³¹ Ibid., 501. The stance that the Chipko movement is supported by Hinduism is a contested point. Callicott’s work on Hinduism and Ecology posits that the focus on Brahman (supreme reality) as goal outside of our material world leads to Hindus goal to “transcend this world, not improve it.” Despite Callicott’s hostile view of nature under Hinduism, he believes that the Chipko movement utilizes “the foundational ideas of Hindu philosophy” to motivate this environmental rebellion. See Baird J. Callicott, *Earth’s Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

religiosity and/or spirituality in its discourse of environmental activism propelling many to support its cause.

This consideration of religion and ecology allows us to see how religion, can promote ecologically minded practice. When considering Hindutva approaches to ecology, however we must move beyond a “religion and ecology” framework to consider both how Hindu ecologies are constructed and, as a connected, but somewhat distinct project, how Hindu *nationalist* ecologies form.

Hinduism and Ecology

While White’s discussion of religion and ecology begins with Christian doctrine, the conversation has expanded beyond Christian circles to many world religions to challenge existing dogmas in light of the ecological problem. Hinduism is, as I have already indicated, not exempt — is Hinduism eco-friendly? This question essentializes the plurality of Hinduism, which is a set of multifaceted religious and cultural traditions with distinct regional variations. The acknowledgement of the plurality of positions and ontologies within “Hinduism” must be recognized. Therefore, asking this question — “is Hinduism eco-friendly?” — does not elicit a simple answer. The Chipko movement elucidates an ecologically minded practice in Hinduism, but pollution of the Ganges, sometimes blatantly overlooked by spiritual leaders stands in opposition to the proposal that Hinduism is somehow inherently eco-friendly. The answer to the question is therefore highly contextual. I showcase a few of the ways in which critical analysis, textual analysis, and ethnographic work has sought to illuminate how Hinduism can be in conversation with ecological practices.

In contrast to Western, Judeo-Christian religions, South Asian, East Asian and Native American traditions have generally been regarded as “inherently more congenial to the environment.”³² In fact, some scholars have suggested the importation of environmental ethics of Buddhist and Hindu traditions rather than “Western” traditions, to address the environmental crisis.³³ To draw these binaries between East and West simply essentializes traditions and in the circumstances of religion and ecology romanticizes and prioritizes so-called Eastern traditions as more ecologically friendly. The focus of this paper is not to interrogate the degree to which Hinduism is ecologically friendly, but rather how Hinduism is used as a rhetorical tool to enact environmental work. In other words, I seek to answer the following question: how is environmental work implemented using Hindu traditions? Glimpsing into the rich history of India’s sacred geographies is imperative to understanding how contemporary environmental movements in India deploy Hindu nationalist rhetoric to codify the landscape.

The transposition of the cultural, religious, and sacred onto physical geographies is not unique to India as landscapes are vectors of meaning making and spaces of national identity. However, the relevance of sacred geographies in the Indian context is significant. Diana Eck argues that, “there is no other major culture that has sustained over so many centuries, and across such diverse regions, a fundamentally locative or place-oriented worldview.”³⁴ In her book *India: A Sacred Geography* (2012), Eck explores the interwoven world of the divine and the physical world by looking at how the practice of pilgrimage interconnects expansive subcontinental geographical features through Hindu mythical and ritual imagination. Eck’s analysis focuses on

³² James, “Ethical and Religious Dimensions,” 499.

³³ John Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 4.

³⁴ Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Harmony Books, 2012), 55.

the historical constructions of sacred, yet also considers how sacredness is understood in India today.

Eck introduces her project about the sacred geographies of India by focusing on the River Ganga, especially as it flows through Banaras, or Varanasi in north India. As a significant pilgrimage site for many Hindus, Varanasi has often been a city that is compared in its sanctity and religious preeminence to Mecca, Jerusalem, and Rome — a significant pilgrimage site for the Hindu traditions. Eck quotes Norman Macleod, a British civil servant in the 1860s who said of Varanasi that, “I have never seen anything approaching to it as a visible embodiment of religion; nor does anything like it exist on earth.”³⁵ As Macleod infers, Varanasi becomes emblematic of how mythological histories are made tangible through the demarcation of sacred areas, therefore “embodying religion.” This is done through comprising “natural” and human-made collections of sacred symbols and landscape markers that carry semantic value resulting in the mapping of mythical, religious worlds onto geographies of the physical world. In what Gavin Flood calls “a projection of sacred reality.”³⁶

Varanasi holds a coveted position in the sacred geography of India for a variety of reasons that include natural features, built environs, and mythic histories that imbue the sense of sanctity to the land. Known as Kashi, or the City of Light, the city is envisioned as the earthly manifestation of Shiva’s infinite, luminous sacred emblem, the linga of light. Varanasi is one of the twelve places throughout the country where the divine light is said to have touched the landscape linking the cosmos to the earth.³⁷ The presence of the sacred Ganges River, which

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ Wilbert M. Gesler and Margaret Pierce. "Hindu Varanasi." *Geographical Review* 90, no. 2 (2000): 222.

³⁷ Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 10.

marks the eastern boundary of the city is particularly auspicious.³⁸ The Ganga, like other rivers in India is believed to be a purifying Goddess in liquid form. The mythic history and natural features of the city have led to the construction of countless man-made sites of worship including *dhams*, or abodes of the gods which manifest in the form of shrines. Due to its great religious auspiciousness, Varanasi is a highly desirable place for pilgrims many of whom believe that by dying in the city their souls will achieve *moksha*, or final release from the otherwise repeated cycle of birth and death (*samsara*). The sacred dimensions of the landscape are not rendered in traditional Western maps depicting the landscape, but seen through local histories and religious narratives and, pilgrimage that have been practiced for centuries.

Under colonialism the mapping of India carried out by British surveyors and cartographers was a form of governing territory and a method of “knowing territory.”³⁹ This Western cartographic form of rendering landscape has a very different purpose than that of imbuing a landscape with mythological, religio-cultural histories. The implementation of British maps homogenized and took away a crucial dimension of the geographical landscapes by presenting it through scales, topography, and dots to represent populations and other features innate to Western mapping practices. In this way, British maps, made invisible any reference to cultural meaning and memory. More importantly, these maps sought to depict the landscape through an etic point of view. In short, cartographic mapping practices fail to illuminate the presence of sacred narratives on the landscape as they transcend the two-dimensional geographical scale.

³⁸ More about Ganga and its presence in Hindu scriptures appear later. References to the Ganga as both a river and a goddess is found in most major Hindu texts (e.g *Rig Veda*, *Mahabharata*, and *Valmiki Ramayana*) Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Ibid., 55.

While maps of India today are depicted through Western cartographic methods, the landscape continues to be imbued with religious meanings, specifically through the language of sanctification. Sanctification of landscapes is understood as a strategy through which the features of India's landscape are established as sacred so that divine presence can be experienced, named, and storied.⁴⁰ The land therefore bears traces of the gods and is storied through the constant re-telling of mythological narratives.⁴¹ The landscape therefore connects physical space with the lore of gods, heroes, and saints which in turn render locations sacred which in turn legitimates specific geographical features as "sacred."

The sanctification of the landscape is not done simply by creating boundaries of sacred and profane spaces based on a certain cultural or religious history. In fact, the notion that religions separate space into sacred and profane realms is commonly invoked and stems from the work of Mircea Eliade.⁴² However, this notion of strict, dichotomous distinctions is not always clear but often requires a more nuanced, contextualized approach. In India, this distinction is seldom clear as the sacred geography of the city, or land is often in flux.⁴³ Rather, the land is subject to both natural and human alterations as the physical landscape acts as a medium for humans to project meaning onto.

When considering the distinction between Hindu sacred and profane spaces, Varanasi undoubtedly holds a coveted position as "a model for the entire cosmos" and as a place where people travel to for pleasure and business as well as for, religious duty and, liberation from

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ In the current political moment, these mythological narratives are being used as a political tool and carry a highly sectarian cultural semantics.

⁴² See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961)

⁴³ Gesler and Pierce, "Hindu Varanasi," 222.

samsara.⁴⁴ But Varanasi does not stand alone, but dwells in relation to the rest of the subcontinent, and furthermore to the universe. One of Eck's central claims and realizations in studying sacred geographies of India is that Varanasi cannot be understood alone, "but only in the context of a much wider system of meanings in which significance is marked not by uniqueness, but by multiplicity."⁴⁵ This implies a web of connections repeated throughout the subcontinent in which the sacred is not marked by uniqueness, but by connectedness.⁴⁶

Eck's work orients us to the complex layering of Hindu landscapes with key insights into the dynamism and dialectical nature of landscape as a medium for meaning making.⁴⁷ David Haberman, a South Asianist contemporary to Eck, also considers the making of sacred geographies, focusing on the state of the highly polluted Yamuna, a river that, like the Ganges, is conceptualized as a goddess flowing with liquid love.⁴⁸ Haberman moves beyond Eck's mostly historical method by approaching the way that the Yamuna-as-Goddess is perceived by devotees and environmental activists today. Using a religion and ecology framework to explore how the degradation of the Yamuna is not just an ecological problem but, that it also involves a religious crisis threatening the divinity of the river.⁴⁹ As Haberman considers Hindu mythological stories

⁴⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁵ Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *India a Sacred Geography* by Diana Eck is 541 page book that speaks extensively to the topic of sacred geographies. Her project, however, is specifically geared towards understanding a mythological working of the landscape, focusing on local histories of deities and other place-based tales. This work takes a more historical approach than required for the scope of my project. As I look at Hindu nationalist rhetoric around protecting the landscape, the histories Eck alludes to become important to how we understand the ways that places are "legitimated" as sacred more broadly.

⁴⁸ David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ In fact, Haberman dedicates five or so pages discussing the formation of the field of religion and ecology. He writes explicitly on the contributions of White disagreeing with some of

and the implications they carry for the landscape, he suggests, in line with his interlocutors in India that landscapes, can be, and in fact should be, understood through religio-cultural histories so as to confront environmental problems. I argue are these very same ideas are in fact redeployed through distinct rhetorical tactics by Hindutva environmental campaigns.

To a certain degree, then, Haberman's scholarly-activist work might be seen as vaguely parallel rhetoric of Hindu nationalist ecology as he approaches the "death of the Yamuna" through a Hindu theological framework. He does this by looking at texts written over many centuries and by and talking with contemporary practitioners who worship along the river placing primacy on the Hindu perspective of the river.⁵⁰ Haberman asserts that the premodern nature of religion — the ancient texts and mythological stories can be put into dialogue with the modern reality of environmentalism and politics, which we assume must somehow be secular. The framework of his ethnography of the Yamuna can be understood as an example of "sacred modernity."⁵¹

Sacred modernity is a term developed by Tariq Jazeel in his book *Sacred Modernity: Nature, Environment, and the Postcolonial Geographies of Sri Lankan Nationhood* (2013) in which he explores the parallels between Sinhalese Buddhist traditions and the formation of a Buddhist Nationalist tradition in Sri Lanka. Similar to my analysis of how religio-political Hindu rhetoric imbues the landscape with particular meaning in India, Jazeel looks at how Buddhism and its aesthetic and ethnic domains form a critical building block in the formation of the

White's conceptualization of religion and ecology, but understanding the framework to be fruitful in studying the Yamuna and the confluence of religious belief and practice and the river. See Haberman, *River of Love*, 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁵¹ See Tariq Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity : Nature, Environment and the Postcolonial Geographies of Sri Lankan Nationhood* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013)

post-independent Sri Lankan nationhood. The term sacred modernity suggests a tension between the premodern roots of certain forms of religious thought and political modernity, which is thought of as a form of secular discourse.⁵² The importance of this term is paramount to understanding how Hindutva environmental movements utilize the trope of India's "golden age" and other references to the country's great past to propel their environmentalist agenda, suggesting that sacred modernity can be understood in this context as the tension between contemporary environmentalism, which is often assumed to be secular, with and the pre-modern discourses of religion.

Bringing together notions of Hindu sacred geographies, which project an imagined Hindu past and future onto the landscape, and Jazeel's development of the term sacred modernity, the Ram Janmabhumi movement illuminates how contemporary Hindu nationalist forces enact communalist political campaigns rooted in the sacred narratives of a Hindu past. The Ram Janmabhumi movement — the movement led by Hindu nationalists to build a grand temple for Lord Ram at his supposed birthplace in Ayodhya by destroying the preexisting Babri Mosque — illuminates how Hindutva is deployed in terms of claiming particular lands as belonging to Hindus exclusively. The peak of this movement, still underway today in 2018, took place in 1992, a time referred to as the "saffron wave"⁵³ by scholars of Indian politics because of how Hindu nationalists steadfastly and with vigor aroused a fervor of Hindu nationalism through public acts, many of which sought to agitate minorities and assert Hindu dominance. Coinciding with the increasing displays of Hindu chauvinism was the rise in number of BJP seats in the Lok

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999)

Sabha (India's Lower Parliament) demonstrating that these government sponsored sectarian sentiments were being reinforced by a voting public and echoed in the public sphere, making saffron a favorable color.⁵⁴

In addition to laying claim to a piece of land, Ram's supposed birth place, that Hindu nationalists believed belonged to them alone, the negotiation over Ayodhya as a sacred place is remembered more as an act of communalism. Before the 1980's, there were numerous temples and shrines in Ayodhya that claimed to be the supposed birth place of Ram. Muslims of Ayodhya lived more or less peacefully along their Hindu neighbors and used the 16th-century Barbi Mosque as an active place of worship. The Sangh parivar, an extensive network of Hindu nationalist organizations, carefully raised support for the destruction of the mosque by organizing people under the banner of *kar seva*, a term that evokes religiously-motivated voluntary work that benefits the good of the community.⁵⁵ Volunteers, or *kar sevaks*, were seen as liberating Ram from oppressive foreign rule and returning the supposed "true" and site of the deity's birth to the rightful occupiers of the land — Hindus. The final act of demolishing the Babri Mosque in 1992 was thus enacted against the backdrop of Hindutva rhetoric, which posits that Hindu tradition and history is not only superior to Islamic tradition and history (which is, of course, a shared history), but also the only "natural" history of India. Moreover, demolition of

⁵⁴ The iteration of the saffron wave beginning in 1990 which led to the influx of BJP seats in the Lok Sabha (India's Lower Parliament) has continued to today. For example, the 8th Lok Sabha, elected in 1984 consisted of 2 candidates from the BJP, the 9th Lok Sabha, elected in 1989 consisted of 89 candidates from the BJP, and the 16th Lok Sabha, elected in 2014 consisted of 272 candidates from the BJP out of a total of 545 members. In light of this, it also must be understood that Hindu nationalist do not hold a position of political hegemony. Many in India are actively speaking out against the Hindu nationalist party, namely the marginalized populations, and to depict the Indian political landscape as one composed of a singular ideology erases the voice of many citizens. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. "Lok Sabha"

⁵⁵ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. "Kār sevā."

the Barabri Mosque in Ayodhya is also a physical and violent manifestation of Hindutva ideology that others and demonizes the non-Hindu, in this case Muslim, as non-citizen and foreign invader. As an early symbol of the BJP's rise to power in the Lok Sabha, Ayodhya quickly became a cultural symbol ingrained in the consciousness of contemporary Hindu nationalist history, serving as a metonym for the "us" versus "them" rhetoric and political discourse of Hindutva. This is an example as to how sacred geographies are utilized as political tools to advance Hindu cultural dominance practices espoused by Hindu nationalist rhetoric.

Unpacking the relationship between religion and ecology, Hindu nationalism, and sacred geographies are all crucial orienting frameworks in preparing for an analysis of contemporary environmental movements in India. Sacred geographies are a starting point to understanding how contemporary environmental campaigns evoke traditional Hindu symbols and stories to arouse mass Hindu nationalist affection for specific kinds of environmental consciousness. Sacred geographies play a vital role in the selecting of particular sites for ecological work. In the following section, I will rely on these orienting frameworks to analyze contemporary environmental movements in India looking specifically at Hindutva rhetorics and how Hindu nationalists posit environmentalism as work relevant to the reinvigoration of the nation. These rhetorics which, I argue, are composed of inherently paternalistic, communalist, and xenophobic discourses in favor of a Hindu nationalist ecology are deployed by a constitutionally secular government.

Hindu Nationalism and a Formation of an Environmental Politic

Central to my discussion of contemporary Hindu nationalist ecology is what I suggest are the essential connections that Hindu nationalists draw between nation, Hindu identity, and the

“natural” environment. I will elucidate this by looking at government-sponsored campaigns, which are prime examples of my suggestion that environmentalism in contemporary India can be carried out in tandem with Hindutva discourse through politicizing the landscapes as inherently Hindu. Central to this discussion is the development of environmentalism in India as well as the development of Hindu nationalist ideology in the post-colonial state.

Most of the existing scholarly and journalistic interpretations of environmental work in India compartmentalize the two — environmental and Hindu nationalism — as distinct.⁵⁶ However, Mukul Sharma’s work emphasizes the relationality between environmental work and Hindu nationalist ideologies. I take Sharma’s argument further by positing that Hindutva politics are manifest in specific visions of not only what it means to be a “Hindu”, but also particular visions of nature, culture, and contemporary Indian nationhood that intersects with claims to space and land constructing them through a Hindutva lens.⁵⁷

Sharma metaphorically interrelates environmental conservation and Hindu politics through his development of the terms “green and saffron.”⁵⁸ The term “saffron” carries specific religious connotations in Hinduism. Similar to imagery that American political parties deploy, saffron has historically been a symbol of Hindu politics that rely on religious associations.

⁵⁶ Many analyses of religion and ecology in the context of Hinduism and India by default begin with discussions on Vedic and Puranic interpretations of human and nature relationships. Sharma, as well as myself, believe the importance of Hindu politics, which inherent deploy Vedic, Brahmanical, and Puranic (textual, traditional) must be central to an analysis of contemporary forms of environmentalism in India.

⁵⁷ Sharma brings together environmentalism and Hindu nationalism to articulate how political ideology rooted in Hindutva ideology and revivalism is deeply influencing environmental initiatives. He looks at how traditional symbols like “Mother India” are at work in arousing nationalist sentiments to call for action in ecological work. See Mukul Sharma, *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012)

⁵⁸Ibid., 6.

Saffron functions as an adjective to describe the religiously derived politics affiliated more recently with policies of right-wing Hindu nationalist parties that posit a vision of Indian nationhood that seeks a return to ancient, or Holy Indian culture and traditions.⁵⁹ Many *sadhus*, or Hindu renunciants traditionally adorn themselves in the color saffron as it symbolizes religious devotion. Hindu nationalist groups, since the time of the British Raj have adopted the color as representative of their Hindutva politics. Now the color holds an authoritative position in the historical milieu of nationalist discourse and most recently in the discourse of the current ruling Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, which has co-opted saffron. The color, along with other symbols that I discuss further, appear everywhere — from their political pamphlets to the *kurtas* (tunics) worn by politicians belonging to the party.⁶⁰

In order to understand the political and cultural clout of the deployment of “saffron” and the discourses that inform its construction, further attention to the history of the term Hindutva, or “Hinduness” is essential. Today, Hindutva is the predominant ideology informing Hindu nationalism in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling and largest Hindu nationalist party is a member of a larger family of organizations adhering to a Hindu nationalist agenda, named the Sangh Parivar.⁶¹ Hindutva is not derived from work of the Sangh Parivar, but rather has historically informed their work and been co-opted to support contemporary causes.

⁵⁹ “Saffronisation” is both an etic and emic term. Political leaders of the BJP use the term to evoke their goal of returning to the glory days of India, while critics of right-wing policies carry negative connotations of the term -- i.e communalism, xenophobia.

⁶⁰ Sadan Jha, "Challenges in the History of Colours: The Case of Saffron" *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, no. 2 (2014): 199-229

⁶¹ Sangh Parivar is a family of organizations with a plethora of different interests that share the ideology of Hindutva as central to their political agenda. See, Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 96.

The term Hindutva originates from a highly political time of colonial resistance and Hindu unification against the British Raj. While even in its conception it specified an exclusionary politics, contemporary deployments of the term are more explicitly grounded in communalist sentiments.⁶² Vinayak Damodar Savarkar coined the term in his text *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1924). In the opening chapter, Savarkar explains the complex nature of Hindutva stating: “Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be by being confounded with the other cognate term, Hinduism. Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva... Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole being of our Hindu race.”⁶³ His main point here is that the term should not be conflated with Hinduism, but rather should be seen as encompassing “race” as well as the discursive history of a unified people.

Savarkar’s ideological piece, which he wrote while incarcerated in a colonial prison in the early 1920s, continues to act as a core principle of Hindu nationalist ideology. The term Hindutva equates a religious identity with “racial” and national identities in a complex way. In doing so, it also makes a territorial distinction. Based on a history of space and cultural practices, Hindutva codifies the land as a territory of a particular people in relation to the geography: “A Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha, from the Indus to the Seas as his Father-Land as well as his Holy-Land that is the cradle land of his religion.”⁶⁴ Savarkar maps

⁶² Important to note here is that when the term was conceived Hindus were under colonial rule of the Raj. Today, however, Hindus of the BJP hold coveted position of power as they are the ruling party and utilize this rhetoric to exclude minority communities. In other words, since conception, those utilizing the term have gone from a position of being under colonial rule to ruling a nation.

⁶³ Savarkar, *Hindutva; Who is a Hindu?*, 3-4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, i.

two essential qualifiers of Hindutva: territory and religion.⁶⁵ In a certain sense, territory and religion are not discrete, but one in the same as religious narratives draw on mythological histories on the landscape. Hindutva, however, has come to refer to an essentialized Hindu cultural, historical, and above all national religious identity, which marks the Hindu People as a whole and as a nation.⁶⁶

The purpose of the term Hindutva, made quite overt by Savarkar, was to construct a national identity as India rose to overturn British imperialism.⁶⁷ The inception of the term carried anti-colonial sentiments: defining the nation as Hindu was a way to unify the majority of the populace in an effort to mobilize and displace the Raj. However, in doing so his articulation of a nationalism included a discursive set of qualifiers that constructed a Hindu identity in a way that places non-Hindu, namely Christian, Muslims, Dalits, and other marginalized groups, outside the imagined nation. More contemporarily, Hindutva contributes to a majoritarian nationalism that equates India with Hindu society and seeks to purify culture by cleansing it of those cast as “foreign.”

Savarkar was a twentieth-century political figure in India who coined the term Hindutva, but the term and the Hindu pride it captures has been and continues to be espoused in the public

⁶⁵ Stories of sacred geographies conceptualize the land as a land naturally belonging to those of the “Hindu race.”

⁶⁶ Religious identification is implied as a central quality of both the region and culture Savarkar posits as Indian nationalism. While not the focus of this capstone, I should note here the Hindutva politics of exclusion target not only Muslims, but also Dalit and other marginalized communities (LGTBQ folks, atheists, and Christians).

⁶⁷ Given the plurality of Hindu traditions, the formation was intended to unify the plethora of Hindu traditions across difference. In doing so, Savarkar focuses on territory, shared history, and all-encompassing religious ideas. His project was not solitary, but stood in relation to a plethora of reform and revival groups that attempted to fit Hindu traditions into straight-jacket definitions of “religion.”

sphere. In *The Saffron Wave* (1999), Thomas Hansen describes the recent rise of Hindu nationalist discourse. He argues “that Hindu nationalism has emerged and taken shape neither in the political system as such nor in the religious field, but in the broader realm of what we may call public culture—the public space in which a society and its constituent individuals and communities imagine, represent, and recognize themselves through political discourse, commercial and cultural expressions, and representations of state and civic organizations.”⁶⁸ In other words, Hindu nationalism has solidified in public culture through a collective conscious that is informed by everyday rhetoric coming from religious, political, and cultural sources. Furthermore, Hindu nationalism cannot be understood as solely being disseminated from political authorities — it is created bilaterally and dialectically through citizens and government.

Hansen argues that the public identity of the nation has increasingly relied upon the reinvigoration of Hindutva, which includes xenophobic discourses in the realm of democracy. The exclusionary nature of Hindutva is now deployed openly, and with great support, in a multicultural and ostensibly secular nation. It has become a powerful political tool that grants contemporary politicians a historically backed rhetoric of patriotism and xenophobia. As stated earlier, the ideology of Hindutva today is located in politics of the BJP, India’s current ruling party. The BJP is widely seen as representing facets of Hindu communalism and nationalism and has become the ruling party of India and the major opposition party to Congress, the so-called secular part of Nehru, Gandhi, and other founding members of India.

More contemporarily, the presence of the BJP in India’s government has crescendoed since 1989 as the BJP has continued to secure increasing numbers of seats in the Lok Sabha, the

⁶⁸ Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 5.

lower house of India's parliament and the election of the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in 2014. Prior to his Prime Ministerial position, Modi served as the chief minister of Gujarat. Under his leadership communal riots engulfed Gujarat in 2002, during which more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed. Modi's and Gujarat's state forces were accused of condoning, or doing little to put combat communal violence. This incident, which is linked to the violence that erupted around the controversy, serve as yet another violent example of Hindu nationalist phenomenon that the BJP has not contested, nor condemned.

The ideology of Hindutva is pervading India society in other, less violent ways. For example, in January 2017 Modi assembled a committee of scholars in New Delhi and tasked them with rewriting the history of the nation. Using DNA evidence, archaeological findings, and other material evidence, the task force, under the guise of the BJP, is setting out to prove that the Hindus living on the subcontinent today are direct descendants of the first inhabitants of the land mass and not of a lineage that was introduced through conquest or migration.⁶⁹ The purpose of constructing this narrative of Hindu indigeneity and cultural supremacy is to challenge a narrative of secularity, multiplicity, and pluralism that was central to the early architecture of the Indian nation in 1947 and to posit Indian culture as being synonymous with Hindu culture.⁷⁰ The cohort of scholars involved in this project are working overtly in the public sphere through educational reforms and changing narratives to posit the cultural supremacy of Hinduism which

⁶⁹ See Julius Lipner, "On Hinduism and Hinduisms: The Way of the Banyan." In *Hindu World*, edited by Mittal, Sushil and Gene Thursby. 1st ed. (London: Routledge Ltd, 2004)

⁷⁰ India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, promoted a secular and tolerant state that did not conflate Indian identity with Hindu identity and the inverse. He said "it was (and is) entirely misleading to refer to Indian cultural as Hindu cultural." Rupam Jain and Tom Lasseter, "By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists Aim to Assert their Dominance Over India." *Reuters*, March 6, 2018.

also demarcates non-Hindus as not as integral to, and in fact a danger to, the nation. This method of rewriting history is one of a plethora of examples of how under Modi's stewardship the BJP has elevated Hindu importance over the importance of other religious groups.

The claim of indigeneity ties the Hindu people to the soil of the subcontinent. Because the land plays an important role in many Hindu histories and scriptures (e.g., *Mahabharata* epic and the *Puranas*⁷¹), contemporary Hindutva discourse often claims that today's Hindus are direct descendants of the authors of these texts.⁷² Texts and land exist in a reciprocal relationship in which Hindu scriptures are read as empirical evidence to support Hindu nationalist understandings of the land and their indigeneity to the subcontinent — acting as a form of sacred legitimization to their claims.⁷³ The relationship linking territory to Hindu traditions is the basis of Savarkar's formulation of Hindutva. The political agenda of the BJP is highly influenced by its goals to remake Indian society, history, polity, and ecology through the reinvigoration of Hindu identity to the land of India. Also key to how the BJP and its allies are carrying out these political goals is through laying claim to certain elements of the landscape that carry significant

⁷¹ For example, in the *Bhagavata Purana*, recounts one of the many tales of the river Ganga stating that: "Vishnu's large toe scratches a hole in the cosmic egg, releasing Ganga. The river washes the dirt from Vishnu's foot before descending to earth, where she then washes away the sins of humanity and purifies the entire world." This Puranic narrative illustrates a Hindu cosmology, linking Hindu scripture to the natural landforms of the subcontinent. References to the Ganga as both a river and a goddess is found in most major Hindu texts (e.g. *Rig Veda*, *Mahabharata*, and *Valmiki Ramayana*) See Kedzior, "Ganga: The Benevolent Purifier Under Siege," 23.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Meera Nanda. "Postmodernism, Hindu Nationalism, and "Vedic Science", *Scientific Values and Civic Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 201-235. Nanda's argument is beyond the scope of this paper, but it investigates the development of a Hindu science that is seen by the author as a "reactionary modernity." The crucial conceptual work to take from Nanda is that this Hindu nationalist science, which has been a source of much social oppression throughout India's history, draws upon upper-caste, Brahmanical sacred books to create authority in many realms of Indian life, one of them being environmental thought.

cultural, mythical, and religious significance to Hindus. In the realm of environmentalism, Hindutva ideology is utilized to motivate and orient contemporary environmental work in India.

Returning to Mukul Sharma's use of saffron, "the saffron wave" is metonymic of the rise of the Hindu nationalism, namely the BJP and its Hindutva ideology since its inception in 1980.⁷⁴ Sharma puts saffron in dialectic with green (read: environmentalism) to explore the polyvalent layers of religion and ecology as it manifests in contemporary Indian political campaigns for environmental restoration and conservation. Green and saffron transfer the location of environmental work from a secular space to a religiously coded and factional space. In one way, I see the use of Hindu ideology as a political tool to support environmental causes particularly helpful to environmental work because it contextualizes, makes urgent, and politicizes an issue that may otherwise receive scant attention from the general public. Simultaneously, the sectarian and communalism sentiments central to Hindutva rhetoric around environmental work is divisive and exploitative of religious dogma for the ends of environmental work that supports a particular idea of Indian nationhood. Additionally, it brings to question the true intentions of this environmental work: is it to serve a religious nationalist agenda or to ameliorate landscapes impacted by anthropogenic climate change, or both?

The terms green and saffron stand in for Hindu nationalist environmental politics and exist in relation to one another in different ways. Green and saffron work dialectically with one another. The "Greening of Saffron" is the mission of Hindu nationalists to include environmental conservation and restoration into their political platform.⁷⁵ Here, environmentalism is overtly

⁷⁴ Politics are distinct from religiosity when it comes to the term "saffron." It is symbolic of the political dimensions of Hindutva. See Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*.

⁷⁵ Since the 1980's Hindu communal forces have joined in environmental activities and shown support for environmental movements throughout the country. *Ibid.*, 13.

political through the use of religious dogma as it is deployed as a means to an end for environmental work. Sharma argues that Hindu religious dharma and activities are often exploited for political purposes by Hindu communal organizations.⁷⁶ The concerns of Hindutva environmental politics draw on glorifications of Hindu sacred geographies — landmarks and cities (e.g Ayodhya), rivers (e.g Yamuna and Ganga), forests, and pilgrimage sites (e.g Varanasi) — framing calls for environmental protection in terms of a religious obligation for Hindus.

The movements of contemporary Hindu nationalist environmentalism manifest in the protection of the material conditions of the natural world, however the layered meaning of this environmental work is much more complex. Harking back to V.D. Savarkar’s development of Hindutva as a national identity that posits a particular view of Indian nationhood Hindu nationalist ecological efforts are highly informed and constructed around communalist sentiment. The term pollution is central to these sentiments. Pollution in modern environmental discourse relates to the material impurity of a space, be it the effluence of a factory in a river, or the presence of plastic debris in a forest. In this particular manifestation of right-wing environmentalism, pollution is additionally understood as the degradation of the natural, cultural and historical worlds by unwanted, outside forces that impinge upon the authenticity and singularity, and purity of the nation. This discourse of pollution serves to reify the distinction between that which is “natural” and “native” from that which is “imported” and “new.” Such a discourse serves to restore Hindus as “natural” and Islam, Christianity, and others as polluting to the nation. Pollution takes on this dual meaning of both cultural and material purity, allowing for the conflation of environmental work and xenophobia.

⁷⁶Ibid., 12.

The Sangh Parivar, or the “saffron brigade” has taken up this notion of purity-and-pollution, using environmentalism as a vehicle for larger socio-political goals of creating a Hindu nation. Their formulation codifies certain socio-religious groups as “clean” if they contribute to the dynamic goal of Hindu nationalism, while those in perceived opposition to this goal rendered as impure and polluting others. In other words, the cleaning of material pollution links environmental purity with social and cultural purity. Sharma postulates that environmentalism is a tangible manifestation that furthers Hindutva ideology by ridding of, in a very literal sense, that which is unwanted. Swami Chinmayanand, a BJP member who actively campaigns for environmental causes claims that, “environmental issues and concerns are nothing new for the BJP... The sanctity and sacredness of our environment is closely related with the sanctity of our culture.”⁷⁷ Concern for ecological pollution and social pollution parallel each other in Hindu nationalist rhetorics, which aim for a restoration of a mythical “golden age” of ancient India (specifically before the introduction of Islam to the subcontinent), and seeks to valorize the landscape as unique and central to national identity.

Indian nationalism derives much of its meaning from two discourses central to this topic: religious identity and natural landscape. Hindutva politics has been theorized and studied by scholar Peter Van Der Veer in terms of Indian “religious nationalisms” more broadly.⁷⁸ Peter Van Der Veer’s theory of religious nationalism is as follows:

... (1) that religious identity is constructed in ritual discourse and practice; (2) that these identities are not ‘primordial attachments’ inculcated by unchanging traditions, but specific products of changing forms of religious organization and communication; (3) that religious nationalism articulates discourse on the religious community and discourse

⁷⁷ Interview from Mukul Sharma with Swami Chinmayanand in Haridwar, 26 July 2000. See Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, 53.

⁷⁸Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Delhi [u.a.]: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. xi.

on the nation; and (4) that Hindu and Muslim nationalism develop along similar lines and that one needs the other.⁷⁹

Van Der Veer's definition of religious nationalism, which speaks to the shared practice of ritual as a core unifying identity, clearly speaks to the ideology espoused by Savarkar and by more contemporary Hindutva voices in that it speaks to the shared practice of ritual and practice amongst a community as a core unifying identity.⁸⁰ If current right-wing Hindu nationalist politics can be understood as a form of religious nationalism, which I argue it can be, then it must be considered how this nationalism informed by Hindutva contributes to contemporary environmental politics.

Along with the aforementioned criteria of religious nationalism, Van Der Veer writes that, "the definition of space and territory are central elements of religious nationalism".⁸¹ National landscapes are imagined to be unique and formative to identity, acting as a national symbol that prescribe meaning through history and culture. A nation forms its narrative around its natural features, climate, and environment and takes immense pride in these features, often valorizing them through cultural and historical recognition.

Eco-Nationalism, or the importance of natural landscape in the discursive construction of a nation, influences historical and cultural understandings of the nation and is vital in the development of the religious nationalism of India.⁸² Given the centrality of the landscape to the development of Hindu traditions, India is a particularly strong example of religious nationalists

⁷⁹ Ibid., xii.

⁸⁰ Savarkar says of Hindutva: "Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be by being." See Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 103.

⁸¹ Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, xii.

⁸² Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, 29.

claims to territory. The sacred geographies of India, from the Himalayas in the north to its sacred rivers, are reified in Hindu texts, ritual practices, and political and popular narratives that demarcate the land of the subcontinent as belonging to Hindus. The importance of physical landscape roots Hindu nationalist ideas of the nation in the ecology of the territory codifying the idea of a nation through both religious and environmental frameworks. In this way, Hindu religious nationalism in India is seen both as an attachment to a storied landscape, as articulated by Diana Eck, as well as the attributes of shared ritual practice, and community as articulated by Van der Veer's theoretical development of religious nationalism.

Hindu nationalism is not a new phenomenon. The idea that Hindus are rooted around a particular culture and identity that takes a central role in defining the Indian nation dates back to the nineteenth century when Hindus organized to defy the British Raj. Furthermore, the connection between the Indian subcontinent and the certain groups of people (now called Hindu, namely Brahmins and other high caste Hindus) as indigenous to it dates back millennia. However, the advent of a Hindutva framed environmentalism is novel and a product of modernity. Hindu national ecology has found its voice in the resurgence of conservative right-wing leaders. In the next and final section, I consider the greening of saffron through products of the BJP, namely the BJP's 2014 Manifesto and the Namami Ganga task force.

The Greening of Saffron: Contemporary Environmentalism in India

As the second most populous nation in the world with rapidly expanding infrastructure, India faces a lot of scrutiny from the international community in regards to climate policy. India has the difficult task of balancing two sometimes conflicting principles: exploitation of natural

resources and economic growth. India's balance of the two has proven to be of paramount relevance to the rest of the world, given the country's sheer size and burgeoning position as a global player. Though India is working to confront this balancing act of economic and ecological sustainability in a myriad of ways, the efforts of the BJP are particularly relevant. Led by Narendra Modi, this right-wing party has taken up the ecological question through a Hindu nationalist and communal framework that has significantly impacted the country's ecological consciousness. In other words, environmentalism or "being green" is put into conversation with Hindu nationalist projects mixing the "green" of environmentalism with "saffron."

The BJP has been criticized by the international community for prioritizing economic growth over environmental concerns, as Modi's policy favors business interest over the environment in many ways.⁸³ Despite these issues, the political platform of the BJP addresses environmental concern. The 2014 BJP Election Manifesto itself includes a section devoted to environmental care, suggesting that the issue does hold a place of significance in the party's platform.⁸⁴ However, the language in the environmental section of the election manifesto is steeped in "saffron" rhetoric, drawing from traditional Hindu symbols such as the lotus flower, a symbol associated with purity, and with images of Hindu deities, whose bodies are imagined as the nation itself. The use of such symbols raises the question of whether or not the party's

⁸³ A quick glance at the 2014 BJP Manifesto makes this clear as 14 sections are dedicated to business practices / economy and 4 are dedicated to environmental or ecological concern. See Sabka Saath and Sabka Vikas, *BJP Election Manifesto*, accessed March 2, 2018. https://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf. A sociological post-materialist argument could be made to state that given the lack of basic infrastructure for portions of the India population, environmentalism cannot be addressed until basic human concerns are satisfied.

⁸⁴ All of the major parties in India release election manifestos that spell out their platform and policy ideas prior to the election as a way for voters and government officials to familiarize themselves with the politics of any particular party. *Ibid.*

environmental aspirations are rooted in a legitimate desire to heal ecosystems or are being deployed as means to assert Hindu dominance. As I show, it seems that the BJP is more interested in furthering Hindutva revivalist rhetoric in order to continue the cultural heritage of Hindu Indian society that it is in “cleaning” up the environment.⁸⁵

The BJP manifesto pledges to clean the Ganga, and in doing so it refers to the river as “a symbol of faith in India” that “has a special place in the Indian psyche,” which suggests a multiplicity of meanings beyond ecological restoration placing a primacy on cultural significance.⁸⁶ It brings depth to the ecological problem of modernity and positions religious and cultural concerns as crucial. Under the guise of Hindutva, the contamination of the Ganga is a multivalent phenomenon not just about political ecology, but about religion as well and the need to infuse religion and political ecology as interrelated forms of analysis. For devotees, the Ganga holds unparalleled spiritual significance as residents living along the Ganga exclaim: “Ganga is our most valuable heritage... We are very grateful to Mother. Out of her purity, we become pure every day.”⁸⁷ For these people, just as for those discussed in Haberman’s ethnography about the Yamuna, the pollution and ecological devastation to the river threaten the liquid goddess.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ While these two may not be mutually exclusive, the implications of carrying out the environmental work as a means to advance a political agenda and exclude Dalits, Westerns, and Muslim, (or largely those understood as “Other”) complicates how this work is viewed. Later on I will further delineate how I see two campaigns approaching the ecological question through both genuine desires to ameliorate the landscape and as methods to advance Hindutva ideology.

⁸⁶ Saath, *BJP Election Manifesto*, 10.

⁸⁷ Georgina Drew. *River Dialogues : Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology of Dams on the Sacred Ganga* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 23.

⁸⁸ A major concern beyond pollution for those who worship along the Ganga is the development of dams for hydroelectric power. In Drew’s book, she performs an ethnographic project in the Uttarakhand state along a stretch of the Ganga speaking with practitioners and deploying a political ecology and religious studies framework to make a core conceptual argument that “political ecology requires more religiously attuned analyses, especially in cases when resources are revered”. Drew, *River Dialogues*, 6.

The BJP manifesto reiterates the relationship between ecological conservation and cultural purity. The section on the Ganga is listed under “cultural heritage” in the party’s manifesto instead of under “environment and pollution.”⁸⁹ Such a spiritual framing of an environmental problem creates concern about the party’s selective choice of natural resource protection. It suggests that natural resources that have spiritual significance for Hindus are prioritized, while those without spiritual connotations are given inadequate attention. These conservation priorities that favor sacred features of the landscape demonstrate the interplay between environmentalism and Hindu nationalist rhetoric.⁹⁰

In the BJP’s manifesto, the “Cultural Heritage” section contains a short list of goals all of which speak to the a shared culture of a glorified Hindu past and a therefore a therefore Hindu future.⁹¹ In the case of environmentalism, Hindutva’s political ideology is often articulated by weaving environmental issues into popular discourses that posit the idea of a pure India, as an India composed of Hindus. This is, as Sharma says, another example of how “environmental

⁸⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁰ The efficacy of cleaning the Ganga is up to debate. However, the fact that it is given the space in the party’s manifesto demonstrates some interest in addressing the concerns of the river, whether the intentions are to actually clean it, I argue is questionable. A commonly discussed environmental problem in India is that of air pollution, especially in large urban areas. India has been critiqued, quite harshly, by international bodies regarding air quality. It is important to note that a discussion of air quality is minimal in the manifesto, which I argue is because there are little direct connections between air quality and sacred Hindu geographies.

⁹¹ The “Cultural Heritage” section of the BJP Manifesto is the final section of the manifesto and the agenda items are overtly in the vein of Hindu nationalism. The first item on the short list is “Ram Mandir: BJP reiterates its stand to explore all possibilities within the framework of the constitution to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.” This first action item is an extension of the Rath Ram Yatra, a 1990 an overtly and violent Hindu nationalist religious-political march touring a majority of the subcontinent which ended in the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya as Hindus claimed it was the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama. This march was an example of communalistic, possessive land practices that derived from claims to sacred geographies.

terms tie in nicely with the religious repertoire of sanitation, pollution, sacredness, purity, and purification” allowing right-wing environmental activities to be deployed in tandem, or as a part of everyday Hindutva discourses.⁹²

This pattern moves beyond text and can be seen in the BJP’s policies, too. Starting when he began representing the BJP as Prime Minister in May 2014, Modi has enacted various policies specific to the environment (Namami Ganga campaign and the Ram Setu campaign⁹³, to name two) through the paradigm of the greening of saffron. As is reflected in the manifesto, these environmental policies are conceptualized as matters of cultural heritage, or “the legacy of tangible and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations and maintained in the present, bestowed for the benefit of future generations.”⁹⁴ The use of the term “cultural heritage” when thought of in terms of the heritage of a particular group, in this case those identifying as “Hindu”, in a diverse society carries a rich communalist narrative creating a hierarchy of cultural heritages.⁹⁵

⁹² Sharma, *Green and Saffron* 13.

⁹³ The Ram Setu campaign is another campaign listed in the “Cultural Heritage” section of the BJP manifesto. Akin to Namami Ganga, it seeks to protect a “natural feature” due to its mythological significance to a Hindu identity. The significance being that the stretch of land between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka was a bridge constructed by Lord Ram’s monkey army, a story found in the *Ramayana*. The policy states: Ram Setu is a part of our cultural heritage and also of strategic importance due to its vast thorium deposits. These facts will be taken into consideration while taking any decision on 'Sethu Samudram Channel' project.” See Saath, *BJP Election Manifesto*, 41.

⁹⁴ “Tangible Heritage,” UNESCO Office in Cairo, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, last modified April 2015, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/cairo/culture/tangible-cultural-heritage/>, accessed February 15, 2018.

⁹⁵ The environmental work carried out by the BJP is just one of the few example of the BJP’s effort to create a Hindu India narrative that reduces the status of those from other religious traditions. See Jain and Lasseter, “By Rewriting History.”

A final example of the reliance on “cultural heritage” narratives is apparent in National Mission for Clean Ganga campaign “Namami Ganga.” In an informational video introducing the campaign, the video opens with a capture of a *sadhu* (Hindu ascetic) dunking himself in the sacred water of the Ganges accompanied by the voice of a disembodied narrator saying “Who says, you are just a river? You are my mother, father, teacher and provider. You are the home to my soul.”⁹⁶ The narration throughout gestures to the manifestation of a goddess in the form of a river by referencing to the river as a subject. The video continues to invoke a deep Hindutva rhetoric to frame the urgent need to clean the Ganges, thus reflecting the importance of cultural heritage over the concern for ecological amelioration.⁹⁷ There is little to no discussion regarding how human health or biological functions of the ecosystem are in danger, but reiterates a narrative of purifying the sacred.

The informational video introduces the spectators to Modi’s new council Namami Gange: Integrated Ganga Conservation Mission. Namami Gange furthers the cultural heritage narrative by depicting the Ganges as a goddess in danger. The National Mission for Clean Ganga is a newly formed sector of the government formed by Modi. The mission is to rejuvenate the Ganges, calling “ardent and devoted followers of Ma Ganga” to take part in the campaign.⁹⁸ The video is steeped in Hindu imagery, yet it asks *all* “Indians” to take part in the campaign, thus conflating “Indian” with Hindu.

⁹⁶ “Ganga Documentary Video, Presented by PM Modi and Madison Square.” Youtube video, 6:24, from a televised speech by PM Modi on September 29, 2014, posted by “Vaibhav Gautam,” September 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6einDrt9Vwk>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

The Namami Gange is exemplary of the greening of saffron. The BJP (saffron) has created a new sector to address ecological concerns (green). In Hindi “*namāmi gaṅge*” is a form of pseudo-Sanskrit that means “I bow to you O Ganga.”⁹⁹ Linguistically, the name of the campaign conceptualizes the concern of the Ganga through religiosity as a divine source that must be bowed to, praised in order to be rejuvenated on multiple levels. In the Namami Gange campaign, the Ganga is referred to as “the most worshipped yet the most neglected river” which gestures to the impetus to purify the sacred and the paradox of an impure sacrality.

The tension between material and cultural pollution is brought into question here as the pollution of the Ganga carries a multiplicity of implications, the two of primary relevance being the Ganga as a source of subsistence and the Ganga as an embodiment of spiritual significance and purity. Firstly, the pollution of the Ganga endangers the viability of the water source as a lifeline for the estimated four hundred million living in proximity to the Ganga and relying on it as a source of water.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, the Ganga is a foremost source of ritual purity in the Hindu tradition and as the river becomes increasingly polluted with effluence it brings into question if the sacred can become impure from material pollution and what significance the pollution has on the practice of ritual and reverence of the river. She, Ganga the goddess embodied in the river, is credited with bringing life to the plains of India, where her waters nourish crops, and where she bears the power to purify physical and spiritual maladies.

Given the Hindutva approach of the Namami Gange campaign and the significance of the Ganga as a Hindu cultural symbol the pollution of the Ganga, I argue, that the Ganga can be seen

⁹⁹ Translation and interpretation credited to Professor Emilia Bachrach.

¹⁰⁰ Janak Rogers. "India's Polluted Ganges River Threatens People's Livelihoods." *Deutsche Well*, November 21, 2013.

as a metonym of the pollution to the imagined Hindu nation. Again, referred to as “a symbol of faith and heritage”¹⁰¹ in peril, the Namami campaign seeks to “restore the pride, beauty, and lost glory.”¹⁰² The use of the phrase “lost glory” evokes a nationalist and revivalist desire to return back to the Golden Vedic age that lies at the center of Hindutva ideology, an idea of Hindu supremacy. As environmental and religious and cultural ideas become conflated, the desire to return to a past signifies that in the past the river was clean and the nation was Hindu. The “otherness” that has polluted the river and the nation are named as Western influences (colonial forces, industrialization, the presence of Islam and Christianity) all of which have dirtied the river in a material way and therefore a spiritual way as a stain on the imagined Hindu nation. Given this, efforts to clean the river come with implications of cleaning society as well.

In the case of the Namami Gange campaign, the BJP approaches what many would consider an ecological concern with a focus on national conservatism, or the upholding of cultural and ethnic identity, mixing “green” with “saffron” to make a interwoven tapestry of green and saffron in which either metaphorical color is impossible to isolate from the other. Intertwining the sacred cultural heritage of the Ganga as Goddess with a pressing concern of modernity— ecological awareness, has driven the formation of a regional form of sacred modernity in which historical Hindu cultural stories become central to understanding and confronting quandaries of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The instances of Hindu nationalism that generate attention in public discourse are those of electoral gains, or instances of communal violence akin to Ayodhya and the Gujarat riots.

¹⁰¹ “Ganga Documentary Video,” video, 1:30.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1:48.

However, the pervasive nature of Hindu nationalism is present in seemingly ubiquitous ways. While environmentalism may traditionally evoke ideas of the contemplation of nature, or restoration of habitats, often seen as universally beneficial outcomes, environmentalism can take a plethora of forms. The manner in which the BJP has taken up the ecological question through an overtly Hindutva framework acts as an extension of the Hindu nationalist agenda of creating Hindu cultural supremacy. The greening of saffron presents a form of environmentalism that relies on ideas of Hindutva by drawing on sacred Hindu traditions and furthermore normative visions of the nation as methods for ameliorating environmental degradation.

In efforts to purify the sacred, pollution carries a multiplicity of meanings — as a material fact and as a hindrance to the socio-cultural idea of India as a Hindu nation. In this way, Indian environmentalism is being reshaped by the development of a Hindu nationalist ecology as a method of furthering a Hindutva agenda upon a heterogenous voting public, constitutionally secular, and religiously diverse nation. Within India the implications of this are immense. If Hindu nationalism can find its voice in the realm of environmental work, it is bound to pervade in other ways to mark the nation as one that is distinctly Hindu. Moreover, the development of a Hindutva environmental politic raises the important question of how secular environmental activism in India relates to the coalescing of green and saffron and furthermore, how and if, the BJP will address climate concerns that do not threaten the idealized Hindu nation.

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Coda

A large body of evidence to support my thesis falls outside of the core theoretical scope of my argumentative structure which focuses on analyzing political discourse and rhetoric tools. I omitted a section from the “The Greening of Saffron and the Saffronisation of Green: Contemporary Environmentalism in India” and placed it in the coda. While I find it crucial to my argument, it relies on a whole body of methodological literature, namely that of visual analysis, that is not mentioned elsewhere in the capstone. To properly analyze the video of Modi in New York (and other visual sources that would support my argument) would require a methodology of visual analysis which is beyond the scope of this project. If this project is revisited, a more explicit section would address visual analysis as the use of visual symbols and semiotics is used often in Hindu nationalist discourse.

Hindu nationalist ecological thought is articulated beyond the page and can be observed in Prime Minister Modi’s speeches. In September 28, 2014 the newly elected Prime Minister Modi spoke at Madison Square Garden in New York, attracting 19,000 fans, mostly from the diaspora community, to the arena to hear him speak in Hindi about India.¹⁰³ After hours of performance by Indian actors, singers, artists and promotional videos describing the BJP’s platform, Modi, adorned in a saffron and yellow kurta entered the arena causing a fanfare amongst the crowd. Modi stoically approached the microphone and in a reserved tone said

¹⁰³ PM Modi almost exclusively delivers public speeches in Hindi and a very Sanskritized register of Hindi which is a strategic linguistic nation building move. His use of Sanskritized Hindi, a language affiliated with Hindu teachings and ancient Hindu pasts. Thanks to Emilia Bachrach for clueing me into Modi’s language conventions and how it ties to the Hindu nationalist agenda.

“Bharat mata ki” and the crowd responded with intensity “jai!”¹⁰⁴ The chant, “Bharat mata ki jai” meaning “Victory for Mother India” evokes India as a national personification of goddess, namely a Hindu goddess which carries a communalist semantic.¹⁰⁵

Modi is surrounded by saffron and green flora, Modi embodied India sartorially in his saffron signature Modi kurta and spoke admirably about India to a large diaspora as a form of soft power.¹⁰⁶ The fanfare of the event would lead an unaware viewer to believe that Modi was in fact not a politician, but an international celebrity of high reverence. Towards the end of his speech, after white, saffron, and green balloons descend from the ceiling, the announcer diverts the exuberant crowd’s attention from Modi to one of the megatrons in the arena, which begins to play a video in English about the state of the Ganges River, which also deploys Hindu imagery in very overt ways. (See p. 47 of capstone to see where this conversation continues)

¹⁰⁴“PM Modi’s address at Madison Square Garden,” YouTube video, 1:31:32, from a speech at Madison Square Garden in New York, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ4jbh-SsHc>.

¹⁰⁵This term is met with consternation by Muslim politicians and some that are a part of the Muslim minority. Seema Chishti, “A Mother’s worship: Why some Muslims find it difficult to say ‘Bharat Mata ki jai’,” *The Indian Express*, November 1, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Modi is overwhelming admired by diasporic communities. His speech at Madison Square Garden resulted in over 60,000 requests for free tickets with a capacity of only 19,000 people. The election of Modi, as a Hindu nationalist, has revived a lot of pride in India among diasporic communities around the globe. Additionally, diaspora who support the BJP contribute large sums of money and are a huge source of funding and support for Modi. See Shreeta Sinha, “Indian Leader Narendra Modi, Once Unwelcome in U.S., Gets Rock Star Reception,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2014.