Honors Papers   Student Work

2022

"I am a Hindu; I am an Indian and I am a Man" A Rhetorical Analysis of Contemporary Hindu Nationalist Political Ideology

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"I am a Hindu; I am an Indian and I am a Man"[1]

A Rhetorical Analysis of Contemporary Hindu Nationalist Political Ideology

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May 2, 2022

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the roots of Hindu Nationalist religiopolitical rhetoric. The argument centers around Ram Madhav's 2021 book *The Hindutva Paradigm: Integral Humanism and the Quest for a Non-Western Worldview.* In addition, it examines texts from the websites of various organizations in the Sangh Parivar, a term used for a collection of groups that are aligned in their conservative, Hindu Nationalist agenda. A rhetorical analysis of Hindu Nationalists' language reveals how the Sangh Parivar attempts to distinguish its worldview from so-called western social structures in order to establish the ancient legitimacy of Brahminical Hinduism. Further, this paper frames contemporary Hindu Nationalist rhetoric within the context of historical British colonial efforts to reify Brahminical Hinduism and consolidate Hindu identity in contrast to a Muslim ethnoreligious "other" for Britain's political benefit. This framing reveals how Hindu Nationalist rhetoric parallels and builds on colonial political tactics, illuminating the fallacy of Hindu Nationalists' anticolonial narrative.

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[1] Deendayal Upadhyay as cited in Ram Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm: Integral Humanism and the Quest for a Non-Western Worldview*, (Chennai: Westland Non-Fiction, an imprint of Westland Publications Private Limited, 2021), 167.

INTRODUCTION

On March 22, 2022, in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

Chhattisgarh State Secretary, Prabal Pratap Singh Judev, led an effort to wash 1,250 Indians' feet

with holy water as part of the *Ghar Wapsi* campaign; it was an effort to "reconvert" non-Hindu

Indians "back" to Hinduism. According to Judev, the movement " 'is holy work, country

building work,' " and the "campaign will continue indefinitely until every person who has been a

victim of conversion returns to Sanatan Dharma."[2] Since Judev is a member of the BJP, India's

Hindu Nationalist party which currently holds a parliamentary majority, his actions represent the

central goal of the Hindu Nationalist movement: creating an Indian nation composed only of

Hindus. According to Hindutva ideology (which can be understood as the basis of, and in many

ways analogous to, Hindu Nationalist ideology), if Indians adhere to *dharma* as it is defined by

the social orders and religious doctrine of Brahminical Hinduism, they will be able to create an

idealized Hindu nation.[3] In order to gain support for this ideology and ensure the continued

political supremacy of Hindu Nationalism, the contemporary Hindu Nationalist movement not

only engages in explicit endeavors to increase the Hindu population (such as through the *Ghar

Wapsi* campaign), but their religiopolitical rhetoric functions to frame their ideology as the only

way to overcome real-world social problems and establish a flourishing Hindu nation.

Hindu Nationalists posit that real-world problems, such as socioeconomic stratification,

are left over from India's long history as a subject of imperial rule, first under the Mughal

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[2] OpIndia Staff, " 'Ghar Wapsi' in Chattisgarh: 1250 People Welcomed Back to Hinduism by BJP's Prabal Pratap Judev," *OpIndia*, March 24, 2022. https://www.opindia.com/2022/03/chattisgarh-ghar-wapsi-of-1250-people-in-mahasamund-by-prabal-pratap-judev-bjp/.
Sanatan dharma can be translated as "eternal *dharma*" and, in this context, references Hindu Nationalists' central religiopolitical ideology. I will elaborate on Hindu Nationalists' ideology and understanding of *dharma* shortly.
[3] I will expand on Brahminical Hindu practices in more depth later in the paper. However, in brief, Brahminical Hinduism can be defined as a philosophical form of Hindu tradition that establishes a social hierarchy that elevates high-caste elites.

Empire during the 16th-18th centuries, and then by the British, until India gained independence

in 1947. The Hindu Nationalist movement asserts the view that in order to rid society of the

residue of imperialism, that is, hierarchy and oppression, it is essential to return to the so-called

roots of Indian identity. Hindu Nationalists rely on a narrative of purity versus impurity, linking

external political and social powers with impurity and claiming that their ideology, rooted in

Brahminical Hinduism, has been left untouched by imperialism and thus has maintained its

integrity as a "purely Indian" worldview. Hindu Nationalists employ this notion of essential

"Indianness" to argue that the only way to establish a prosperous nation is to create a society

based on the principles of so-called original Brahminical ideology.

When this rhetoric is examined within the context of Britain's historical influence on the

Indian subcontinent, however, it becomes apparent that Hindu Nationalists' allegedly

anticolonial and patriotic rhetoric is actually rooted in a colonial project that endeavored to

establish Brahminical Hinduism as the only legitimate form of Hindu identity. Despite this

narrative, Brahminical Hinduism has never been the only form of Hindu practice. Rather, non-

Brahminical Hindu traditions are diglossic—that is to say, numerous and diverse—and, just like

Brahminical texts, have existed for millennia.[4] Furthermore, before the period of European

colonization, subaltern and other non-mainstream Hindu religious practices were generally

regarded by Brahmin elites merely as marginal religious traditions. However, from a Protestant

British perspective, both non-text-based and iconographic Hindu practices were considered

sinful. Thus, during the colonial era, British colonizers delegitimized praxis-based forms of

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[4] Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," *Journal of the Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (December 2000): 761–79 and "Unknown Facts about Devadasi," *IndiaTimes,* updated January 19, 2016, https://www.indiatimes.com/news/weird/unknown-facts-about-devadasis-279851.html.

Hindu tradition and reified the Vedas and other ancient Brahminical texts as the most authentic

form of Hinduism. Anthropologist Lucinda Ramberg posits, "The shift from marginal religion, in

Brahmanical reckoning, to false religion, in the Protestant Christian framework of the British,

has had enormous implications for the viability of subaltern religiosity."[5] When the British

reified Brahmanical Hinduism, marginalized forms of Hindu practice were subsequently

classified as illegitimate.

This colonial method of invalidating non-Brahminical forms of Hinduism has had serious

socioeconomic ramifications for non-Brahmin Hindus in India. Lucinda Ramberg's ethnographic

research of the devotional practices of a Dalit community in Karnataka, India serves as one

example of the significant economic losses that non-Brahmin communities have endured because

the colonial British codified Brahminical practice.[6] Ramberg explains that in this South Indian

Dalit community, texts do not delineate devotional practices. Rather, worship is enacted through

the body of the devotee. The devotees are called *jogatis* (or "devadasis, which is a pan-Indian

term usually translated as servant or slave of the god"), and both women and men show their

devotion to the goddess Yellamma by marrying and subsequently "[embodying] the goddess."[7]

This practice challenges norms of gender and sexuality within both traditional Brahminical

Hindu and British Christian worldviews. As a result, *jogatis*' "alliance with the goddess…is not

recognized as a matter of legitimate religion or kinship within the law or by the state

authorities;"[8] it has been (and still is) not only stigmatized but "criminalized."[9] Although the

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[5] Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 16, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70250.
[6] Dalits are a social group that faces extreme socioeconomic discrimination in contemporary India and are thought to fall below the lowest caste in the Brahminical caste system. I will expand more on this hierarchical social system in the forthcoming sections.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid, 3 and 24.

performance of *devadasi* rites dates back to the 9th century C.E., in the mid-1900s, just prior to the end of British colonial rule in India, "British Victorian and textual Brahmanical ideals of exclusive conjugal monogamy converged in a new ideal of respectable womanhood."[10] As a result, the British passed a series of acts that wrote the delegitimization of *devadasis* rites into law. Ramberg writes that

> Once highly sophisticated choreographers, musicians, and ritual performers whose education and wealth was exceeded only by women who were members of royal families, devadasis became illegitimately public women whose exile from the space of the temple was seen to be necessary to the moral uplift of women, religion, and nation.[11]

The plight of the *jogatis* is just one example of the negative cultural and socioeconomic effects of the political and legal legitimization of Brahminical Hinduism at the expense of other forms of Hindu practice. Additionally, although the oppression of the *jogatis* originated during India's period of British colonization, *jogati* practice was further stigmatized and criminalized by a Hindu Nationalist state-led political attempt to consolidate so-called legitimate religion.

One reason that British colonizers endeavored to reduce the numerous, diglossic forms of Hindu practice into a monolithic category—Brahminical Hinduism—was so they could easily establish the Hindu Indian community in contrast to a Muslim Indian "other."[12] According to scholar Prashant Waikar, the British employed homogenizing and polarizing rhetoric as a political strategy to more easily "organize and divide colonial subjects who seemingly shared 'visible and heritable traits.' "[13] In the same vein, "Hindutva reconfigures the otherwise heterogeneous 'Hindu' into a singularized and thus racialized ideological tool for an Indian

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[10] Quotation: Ibid, 23. Origin date of *devadasi* rites sourced from: *IndiaTimes*, "Unknown Facts about Devadasi."

[11] Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess*, 23.

[12] I use the term diglossic to reference the many, varied forms of Hindu tradition as Vasudha Narayanan uses it in her text "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils." See bibliography for the full citation.

[13] Prashant Waikar, "Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva: An Analysis of Narendra Modi's Political Discourse," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (March 22, 2018): 166, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/islastudj.4.2.0161.

ethno-nationalist project."[14] Waikar explains that "insofar as [Hindu Nationalists] were

anticolonial in their actions and aspirations, the Hindutva movements have till today adopted the

racialized discourse the British produced on the subcontinent."[15] Although contemporary Hindu

Nationalist rhetoric undergirds the patriotic legitimacy of the movement's ideology by evoking

ancient Brahminical texts that predate imperial influence, the claim that Brahminical Hinduism is

"fundamentally Indian" is erroneous: the idea that there exists one "original" form of Hinduism,

unscathed by external imperial influence, is, in and of itself, reflective of the divisive British

colonial project.

With this background in mind, the bulk of my argument engages with the 2021 book, *The

Hindutva Paradigm: Integral Humanism and the Quest for a Non-Western Worldview*. This

English-language text was authored by Ram Madhav, a former BJP leader and prominent Hindu

Nationalist figure. Drawing on seminal Hindutva ideologue Deendayal Upadhyay's vision for

how to create a Hindu nation, Madhav propounds a *dharma*-based approach to nation-building

and contrasts this Hindutva philosophy with so-called western social structures. I bolster my

argument by analyzing rhetoric of other Hindu Nationalist political leaders and ideologues, as

well as the websites of prominent Hindu Nationalist organizations (known collectively as the

Sangh Parivar). Together, I consider these texts to be adequate representations of Hindu

Nationalist ideology, both from the movement's outset, and into the present day.

In light of the implicit colonial legacy of the idea of Brahminical Hindu supremacy, I will

engage in an analysis of the Sangh Parivar's religiopolitical rhetoric to illuminate this

fundamental fallacy of Hindu Nationalist ideology. To do so, I will consider how Hindu

Nationalists frame their Brahminical interpretation of *dharma* as antithetical to how they

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

understand the "west." Further, I will show how the Sangh Parivar uses religious language as a strategy to reinforce social hierarchies (despite claiming to do the opposite) and frame Brahmanical Hinduism as the essential way to establish a Hindu nation. Additionally, I will consider how, through the *Ghar Wapsi* movement, Hindu Nationalists situate their ideology in contrast to a non-Hindu "other" in order to evoke an anticolonial sentiment. Through these examples I will illuminate how, by scapegoating the "west" in order to uplift Brahminical Hinduism, Hindu Nationalists create a myth of meritocracy and equate their political ideology with "genuine Indianness." Despite its anticolonial narrative, the movement builds on and perpetuates a British colonial legacy that reified the sole legitimacy of Brahminical Hinduism. As such, through their religiopolitical rhetoric, the Hindu Nationalist movement reinforces contemporary social hierarchies that ensure the supremacy of the high-caste elite.

BACKGROUND: BRITISH COLONIAL LEGACY AND THE SANGH PARIVAR

1947 was a pivotal year in the political and religious history of the Indian subcontinent. As Great Britain withdrew power from India, the former colonizers facilitated the partition of the subcontinent into the modern states of Pakistan and India. The decision to partition India was highly politically contentious, and because it was centered on creating a separate state for the Indian Muslim population, it was also inextricably tied to religion. Muhammad Ali-Jinnah, the leader of the All-India Muslim League, India's Muslim-led political body at the time, fueled the geographic and religious divide. The British supported Jinnah's initiative for partition by "[insisting] that the rights of all minorities be safeguarded" and arguing that Pakistan must be created so Muslims could inhabit a nation in which they were the majority.[16] It was precisely

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[16]Ainslie T. Embree, *India's Search for National Identity* (Delhi: Chanakya Publ, 1980), 108.

through this rhetorical practice of defining Hindus in contrast to Muslims that British colonial

forces homogenized Hindu practice into a reductionist religious framework, one which Hindu

Nationalist organizations still rely on today in their definition and conception of Hinduism.[17]

In contrast to Jinnah and the All-Indian Muslim League, Hindu Nationalist organizations

were opposed to partition on a cultural, historical and religious basis.[18] They believed the

creation of Pakistan fragmented land that belonged to the Hindu community in India. The Indian

National Congress, the leading political party in India at the time, was also opposed to partition

but for different reasons.[19] Congress's argument was predicated on the belief that Hindus and

Muslims could and should live in harmony in a united nation.[20] Despite vehement political

disagreements over partition, in August 1947, as Britain withdrew colonial rule from the

subcontinent, Pakistan was created as a Muslim majority state, and India gained independence

with the Indian National Congress (INC) ascending to a position of political power.

Leading a newly independent nation, the INC wrote and implemented a constitution

based on principles of secular democracy. Hindu Nationalists rejected the INC's secular ideology

and argued that Hindu culture (which they defined in line with a Brahminical Hindu framework)

should be incorporated into the fabric of Indian society. According to a contemporary statement

by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a prominent Hindu Nationalist organization, "It

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[17] Waikar, "Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva."

[18] Ronie Parciack, "Brahmanic Codes and Sanskrit Vocabulary in the Political Language of Islamic Preaching in Contemporary India," *Religions of South Asia* 8, no. 3 (September 11, 2015): 321–38. https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.v8i3.28339; Embree, *India's Search for National Identity,* 43; Bidyut Chakrabarty and Bhuwan Kumar Jha. *Hindu Nationalism in India*. Routledge Studies in South Asian Politics. (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429287220; "The Inception of Vishva Hindu Parishad," Vishva Hindu Parishad - Official Website, Accessed November 2, 2021, https://vhp.org/organization/4/; and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* Veer Savarkar Prakashan: Mumbai, 5th edition, 1969, http://archive.org/details/hindutva-vinayak-damodar-savarkar-pdf.

[19] Sarah Ansari, "How the Partition of India Happened – and Why Its Effects Are Still Felt Today," *The Conversation*, August 10, 2017, http://theconversation.com/how-the-partition-of-india-happened-and-why-its-effects-are-still-felt-today-81766.

[20] Embree, *India's Search for National Identity*.

would have been logical for our post-1947 rulers to re-structure [sic] the national life in keeping with our culture. Sadly, that golden opportunity was lost."[21] Despite Hindu Nationalists' desire to create a nation founded on Brahminical religious principles, the INC's non-sectarian constitution prevailed. However, since 1947, the Hindu Nationalists' religiously influenced political agenda has gained significant support across India.

My research addresses the contemporary rhetoric from three prominent Hindu Nationalist organizations, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). These organizations fall within the category of the Sangh Parivar, a term used for a collection of groups that are aligned in their conservative, Hindu Nationalist agenda. While these three organizations serve distinct functions within the social and political landscape of India, they all align in the language they use to discuss the role of religion in modern India and are therefore all relevant in an analysis of Hindu Nationalist rhetoric.

Founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the RSS presents itself as a patriotic community organization dedicated to ensuring the spirit of the nation through maintaining the vitality of Hindu culture and tradition.[22] RSS membership is limited to men, and the primary activities run by the organization are called *shakhas*, or "branches." These activities include spiritual practices and teachings as well as paramilitary training involving heavy weaponry.[23] The RSS's mission is founded on fundamental Brahminical Hindu concepts including upholding *dharma*. The RSS's "Vision and Mission" claims that the "Sangh's alone has been the voice of genuine patriotic concern amidst the cacophonous, politically inspired shibboleths of undefined

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[21] "Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: Vision and Mission," Accessed November 2, 2021, https://www.rss.org/Encyc/2012/10/22/rss-vision-and-mission.html.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Lauren Frayer, "The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India," *NPR*, May 3, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india.

secularism."[24] This statement implies that the organization opposes the secular nature of the Indian constitution. While the RSS is not a political party, the organization has a significant influence over and shares membership with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party currently in power in India.

The BJP is headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Jagat Prakash Nadda. Founded in 1980, the BJP is a conservative nationalist political party whose ideology emphasizes the importance of intertwining Brahminical Hindu values and Indian politics. In 1996, the BJP won their first general election. Between 1996 and 2014, political rule toggled between BJP and INC power. However, since 2014, the BJP has retained control over the majority of parliamentary seats and has significant support in numerous states across India. The official mission of the BJP is to establish a nation based on the philosophy of integral humanism. According to Hindu Nationalists, integral humanism is a nation-building approach that aims to create a society in which individuals have a dynamic relationship with their community, nation, and spiritual universe. The phrase was coined by the influential Hindutva ideologue Deendayal Upadhyay in the early 1960s and has since served as the basis of Hindu Nationalists' nation-building philosophy.

Lastly, the Vishva Hindu Parishad, founded in 1964, is aligned with the principles of the RSS. Vishva Hindu Parishad can be translated into English as the Universal Hindu Council. As the name suggests, the organization has a far-reaching network of branches both within India as well as abroad. The organization promotes conservative Hindu Nationalist ideology and spearheads campaigns, such as the *Ghar Wapsi* movement, that forward the Sangh Parivar's mission to create a Hindu nation.

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[24] Ibid.

All three of these organizations use religious language to bolster the Hindu Nationalist movement's political agenda and reinforce Sangh Parivar supremacy. Hindutva politicians and ideologues do so by propounding an integral humanist approach to nation-building, identifying Brahminical *dharma* as the only means to create their vision of a Hindu Nation, and establishing their ideology as "fundamentally" Indian. Further, they frame aspects of their Brahminical Hindu ideology in direct opposition to western social systems. However, this narrative is ill-founded since the movement's rhetoric aligns with historically British colonial definitions of Hindu religion. Consequently, despite presenting their Brahminical Hindu ideology as anticolonial and thus "genuinely" Indian, Hindu Nationalist rhetoric appears to mimic colonial tactics of homogenizing a diverse group of Hindu religious practitioners in order to ensure Sangh Parivar political and social dominance.

DEFINING *DHARMA* AND *VARNA*

In order to understand the ideological roots of Hindu Nationalism and interpret Sangh Parivar rhetoric, it is important to understand certain widespread components of Brahminical Hindu tradition. Central to Brahminical Hinduism—and thus Hindu Nationalist ideology and political rhetoric—is the notion of *dharma*. This nebulous term does not have a direct English translation, though it is commonly understood as an individual or community's prescribed duty or way of being and acting.[25] Hindu Nationalist ideology is founded upon the belief that *dharma* is the basis of integral humanism; in order to adopt an integral humanist nation-building philosophy and establish a prosperous Hindu nation, individuals must adhere to the Brahminical

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[25] Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Hindu worldview in which one's *dharma* is determined by one's *varna*, or their position within society. Without *varna* to determine one's *dharma*, the whole social system would collapse.

Although *dharma* is present in non-Brahminical Hindu tradition, for many Hindus, the Brahminical and textual components of Hindu worship are inconsequential and in some contexts even unknown.[26] In non-Brahminical Hindu traditions, such as *jogati* practice, *dharma* is often thought to determine gender roles, familial expectations, and other social norms. However, the Brahminical idea that *dharma* and *varna* are interdependent and defined by ancient Vedic texts does not factor into *jogati* practice, nor into other non-Brahminical Hindu traditions.[27] Furthermore, according to religious historian Rupa Viswanath, *varna* is a social order that "describes not the actually existing endogamous groups in Indian society, but an idealized vision of a fourfold Indian society represented in texts composed exclusively by elites over several millennia."[28] This hierarchy-based idealized caste system delineates the "pure" members of society from the "polluted" members of society.[29] The purest, or highest ranking, members of the *varna* caste system are the Brahmins—the priestly caste. Unsurprisingly, Brahmins are credited with having authored the ancient texts (such as the Vedas) in which *varna* is defined. In contemporary India, the Hindu Nationalist government promotes this *varna* caste system by identifying Brahminical Hinduism as the only legitimate form of Hindu practice. As a result, their political agenda reinforces socioeconomic stratification and caste-based oppression, such as employment discrimination and widespread instances of abuse against low-caste communities and Dalits—individuals who are thought to fall below the limits of *varna* and, who, according to

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[26] Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils."
[27] Emilia Bachrach, email message to the author, April 26, 2022.
[28] Rupa Viswanath, "Caste and Untouchability," in *Hinduism in the Modern World*, ed. Brian A. Hatcher, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 258, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203362037.
[29] Ibid.

this hierarchy, are considered the most "polluted" members of society.[30] Thus, Hindu

Nationalists' reliance on *varna-dharma* illuminates the narrow and self-serving definition of

Hinduism upon which Sangh Parivar ideology relies.

In his book *The Hindutva Paradigm: Integral Humanism and the Quest for a Non-*

Western Worldview, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) politician and Hindutva ideologue Ram

Madhav outlines *dharma* and *varna*'s contingent relationship, aligning Hindu Nationalist

ideology with a Brahminical worldview. According to Madhav, "Dharma propounds a value

system that binds society together, and gives it a direction and a life mission.…Hindus call it

Sanatana Dharma, meaning an eternal value system, universal in time and space."[31] This "value

system" can be interpreted to be the Vedic worldview that says that "the Dharmic social order

stands on four pillars."[32] Within this Brahminical framework, these four pillars exist at the

physical, professional, and spiritual levels as well as the societal level, which are the four *varnas*

as they are defined by ancient Vedic texts. In turn, Hindu Nationalist ideology propounds a

system in which individuals are expected to act according to Brahminical *dharma*, and therefore

subsequently uphold the *varna* system upon which *dharma* is based. This *varna*-dependent

nation-building philosophy serves to both illuminate the clear hierarchy entrenched in Hindu

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[30] For examples of discrimination against Dalit communities, see: Amrit Dhillon, "Coming out as Dalit: How One Indian Author Finally Embraced Her Identity," *The Guardian*, February 19, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/19/coming-out-as-dalit-how-one-indian-author-finally-embraced-her-identity; Jason Burke and Manoj Chaurasia, "Lynching of Boy Underlines How the Curse of Caste Still Blights India," *The Guardian,* October 19, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/19/lynching-boy-underlines-curse-caste-still-blights-india; Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *Why I Am Not a Hindu : A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2019), ProQuest Ebook Central; Shruti I and Madhurima Majumdar, "How Caste Oppression Is Institutionalised in India's Sanitation Jobs," *Scroll.in*, January 29, 2021, https://scroll.in/article/984297/how-caste-oppression-is-institutionalised-in-indias-sanitation-jobs.
[31] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 147 and 150.
[32] Ibid., 164.

Nationalist notions of theology and also points to the Sangh Parivar's inherently text-centric definition of Hinduism and method of establishing a Hindu Nation.

The BJP article "Integral Humanism" reiterates the Hindu Nationalist belief that it is "society and its system's work…to fulfill Dharma."[33] The article defines this concept as "education, culture, and legal system."[34] *Dharma*, as it is typically articulated by Hindu Nationalist actors as well as scholars, is not a concrete "thing" per se, but rather a way of acting. Thus, the BJP's understanding of *dharma* cannot be read simply as three concrete nouns: education, culture, and the legal system, but rather as the *duty* to educate, the *duty* to uphold culture, and the *duty* embedded within the legal system. In light of Madhav's classification that *dharma* asserts a "value system," it is the Vedic *varna* system that determines how to enact these duties.[35] This is to say, the BJP's rhetoric implies the view that *dharma* references a certain, limited notion of the "right" way to act. When taken together, the BJP's interpretation of *dharma* and Madhav's discussion of *dharma* in light of *varna* points to the Sangh Parivar ideology that how one must fulfill *dharma*, or the "right" way to act, is fundamentally dependent upon the theology articulated by Brahminical Hindu texts.

<center>*DHARMA* VERSUS THE "WEST"</center>

In this section I will show how the Hindu Nationalist definition of *dharma*, framed within the Hindutva nation-building philosophy of integral humanism, aligns with Brahminical narratives and emphasizes the text-centric, inherently hierarchical nature of *dharma*. Further, I will show how, by framing this Brahminical definition of *dharma* in contrast to the west, Hindu

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[33] "Bharatiya Janata Party: Integral Humanism," Bharatiya Janata Party, Accessed October 21, 2021, https://www.bjp.org/.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 147.

Nationalists attempt to reify the sole legitimacy of their Brahminical understanding of Hindu identity.

Throughout this section, to analyze Hindu Nationalist rhetoric, I use the words "divine," "spiritual," and "religious," in instances when Hindu Nationalist texts' authors use terms and phrases that, from a scholarly perspective, are understood to be linked to notions of Hindu divinity. In contrast, when Ram Madhav uses the term "religion," he is specifically referring to what he calls "western religion." Although Madhav does not explicitly define what he means by "western religion," he directly references Christian theology when differentiating his own understanding of the divine. (Madhav posits that "The Semitic or Western worldview attributes divinity only to the Trinity—God, His son and the Holy Ghost."[36]) Further, Madhav makes clear that, according to Hindu Nationalists, "western religion" is inferior to Hindu religion and thus does not serve as an adequate framework within which to consider the spiritual essence of Brahminical Hindu concepts such as *dharma.* Further, Madhav as well as the BJP use the broad term "west" to describe the components of a culture that they view as the antithesis of Hindu society. I have interpreted this use of the term "west" (in the context of both religion and secularism), to refer to the legacy of British colonialism in India—which Hindu Nationalists consider pernicious—and the individualistic attributes associated with American culture. In my own writing, I use the term "west" when I am analyzing or directly referring to the Hindu Nationalist use of the term. In contrast, I use the more specific phrase "British colonial" when I am making my own arguments about the ways that Hindu Nationalist ideology reflects historical narratives of Brahmanical Hindu legitimacy.

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[36] Ibid., 150.

Throughout *The Hindutva Paradigm*, Ram Madhav frames *dharma* as a panoramic value

system that encompasses all aspects of Hindu society and must not be limited by what he

classifies as western notions of religion. In doing so, Madhav spurns western frames of thinking

in order to bolster the legitimacy of the Hindu Nationalist worldview. Madhav claims that

dharma is "a worldview that is eminently different from religious and theological concepts that

emanated from the Semitic region or materialist European concepts like capitalism and

communism."[37] Further distinguishing *dharma* from western social structures, Madhav draws on

the ideology of Deendayal Upadhyay, known as the father of integral humanism. According to

Madhav, Upadhyay

> warned about the dangers of wrong interpretations [of *dharma*] arising out of
> internalisation into a Western language system. "Religion means a creed or a sect.
> It doesn't mean Dharma. Dharma is a very broad concept. It is concerned with all
> aspects of life. It sustains society. It sustains the whole world. That which sustains
> is Dharma."[38]

Although, within a Hindu Nationalist worldview, *dharma* is thought to have spiritual attributes

and is conceptually rooted in ancient Brahminical theology, Upadhyay rejects defining *dharma*

as a religion since that would subsequently relegate it to a western—and thus allegedly inferior—

theological categorization.

Upadhyay's definition of *dharma* allows him to explicitly differentiate it from western

influence, thereby identifying *dharma* as a fundamentally Indian concept. According to

Upadhyay, it must not be boxed in by a western definition of religion, since that would

undermine the "genuine Hinduness" of Hindu Nationalist ideology. Ironically British colonial

powers also reified Brahminical Hindu definitions of *dharma* as the most legitimate form of

Hindu practice. Thus, although Hindu Nationalists reject categorizing *dharma* by a western

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[37] Ibid., 147.
[38] Deendayal Upadhyay as cited in Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 144.

notion of religion, their ideology appears to align with the colonial classification of "authentic"

Hindu tradition.

When Madhav defines *dharma*, according to Upadhyay's conceptualization, he uses

divine language and evokes Brahminical Hindu theology in an attempt to establish the ancient

legitimacy of integral humanism, Hindu Nationalists' nation-building philosophy. This further

reveals how Hindu Nationalists attempt to denounce western influence in order to position the

movement's Brahminical ideology as "fundamentally" and "uniquely" Hindu. In a more detailed

discussion of *dharma*'s meaning within the context of integral humanism, Madhav imbues his

language with mentions of divinity, and he references ancient Vedic texts as the foundation of

dharma's definition. Propounding the integral humanist understanding of nation-building,

Madhav argues that according to Upadhyay, "Dharma was the legal and constitutional

framework around which the ["qualities and characteristics that make a nation"] would manifest,

and by which it would be protected."[39] Drawing on quotations from the *Chandogya Upanishad*,

an ancient Brahminical Hindu text, Madhav explains that *dharma* "is omni-theistic, meaning, it

sees divinity all over and everywhere. It is not about 'one God versus many gods'; it is about

'One God versus only God'.…'Whatever is there is Brahman—the divine', is the core message

of Dharma."[40] Madhav situates *dharma* in the context of divinity and frames it as critical to an

integral humanist approach to nation-making, thereby linking Brahminical religious practice with

the creation of an idealized Hindu nation. Further, by using an *Upanishad* in his description of

dharma, Madhav illuminates the importance of ancient texts and Brahminical theology in his

understanding of Hindu practice. When Madhav uses divine language and Brahminical Hindu

terminology and texts to establish *dharma*'s Hindu nation-building efficacy, this rhetoric

[39] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 139 and 143.
[40] Ibid., 145.

supports his claim that framing *dharma* within a western theological construct truncates the concept's all-encompassing nature.

Additionally, Hindu Nationalists use Brahminical texts to reinforce the claim that integral humanism is a social and political necessity. They describe how adhering to their conception of *dharma* is the only way to achieve equality and prosperity. Since the BJP adopted the principles of integral humanism as core to its political mission, Madhav's use of divine language and text-based definitions to discuss *dharma* can be seen as a reflection of BJP ideology. Citing former BJP politician and judge Rama Jois, Madhav quotes, " 'The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* were the primordial source of Dharma, a compendious term of all human rights and duties, the observance of which was regarded as essential for securing peace and happiness to individuals and society.' "[41] The importance of this quotation is manifold. First, by quoting Rama Jois, an individual associated with Hindu Nationalist politics, Madhav links a textually rooted, Brahminical definition of *dharma* with Hindu Nationalist political ideology. Second, the religious underpinning of the word "primordial" connects *dharma* to divinity; it implies that *dharma* has existed since time immemorial, thus making its legitimacy difficult to dispute. Third, implied in the claim that *dharma* is the "essential" mode of "securing peace and happiness," are the arguments that: a) upholding *dharma* is the only route to creating a prosperous society; and b) in order to establish an ideal society—which according to Hindu Nationalists is a fundamentally Hindu nation—one must adhere to this specific, text-based definition of *dharma*. As I have mentioned, relying on ancient texts to delineate what counts as so-called pure or necessary Hindu practice, reinforces constructs of Brahminical caste supremacy and isolates Hindu practitioners who do not practice text-based Hinduism. Finally, Hindu Nationalists' language of primordial

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[41] Ibid., 325.

dharma establishes integral humanism as a nation-building approach that has remained

uncontaminated by the "west" or an external, imperial other. This rhetoric functions to attribute a

sense of "pure" Indianness to *dharma*. However, as I will expand on later, given the colonial

narrative that positions Brahminical Hinduism as solely legitimate, the irony and fallacy of

Hindu Nationalists' rhetoric becomes apparent.

  As Madhav proceeds to discuss integral humanism more directly, he establishes it in

contrast to a western social structure devoid of spirituality. Madhav explains that in both western

and integral humanist theories of society, the individual is "at the center of their thinking."[42]

However, in the western structure, "although man is at the centre of the activity, he is

independent and unconnected with the outer circles like society, humanity, and the universe."[43]

In contrast, according to Upadhyay's vision of integral humanism, "man was at the epicenter of a

spiraling evolution that ultimately leads to the cosmos and divinity. Between man and his

ultimate goal of achieving eternal happiness or moksha, there is no straight line. He has to pass

through society, humanity and the universe before finally realising the divine."[44] Not only does

Madhav explicitly mention the divine, but by referencing *moksha*, Madhav nods to the Vedic

underpinnings of integral humanist ideology.[45] Further, Madhav contrasts this spiritual advantage

of integral humanism with the western individualistic approach to society in which individuals

are delinked from the universe, and thus, within a Brahminical theological construct, are unable

to reach the end state of ultimate spiritual liberation. As such, Madhav again uses divine

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[42] Ibid., 165.
[43] Ibid., 165.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Broadly speaking, *moksha* can be defined as the state of liberation achieved when an individual adheres to their *dharma* according to their *varna*. *Moksha* is one of the components of the aforementioned four pillars of spirituality within a Brahminical framework.

language as a tool to differentiate Hindu Nationalist ideology from western approaches to nation-making.

To further reinforce the superiority of a Brahminical worldview, Hindu Nationalists condemn western individualism by situating all aspects of so-called western social structures (whether they be secular or religious) as diametrically opposed to *dharma* and integral humanism. When Madhav positions *dharma* in contrast to western religion, he refutes the idea that western frameworks have the capacity to sufficiently encompass the sanctity of the Brahminical notion of *dharma*. In his rhetoric, he explicitly articulates western religion as inferior to *dharma*. Yet, Madhav not only frames *dharma* as the opposite of western *religion*, but Hindu Nationalists also posit that western *secularism* is the antithesis of Hindu society. The BJP article "Integral Humanism," argues: "The western vision of looking at man is divided."[46] Madhav elaborates on this claim, noting that "the West has favoured individual over society's interests," ultimately "leading to conflict and war…The Dharmic view has been that the individual and society have an organic and living relationship."[47] Madhav continues to elaborate on the shortcomings of the western approach to society, claiming that "by adopting secularism, [the west has] snapped spiritualism from the public life."[48] Hindu Nationalist rhetoric reinforces the distinction between Hindu society and the west by rejecting western secularism and framing it as fundamentally incongruous with a Brahminical social order. Moreover, Hindu Nationalists further reinforce the divine sanctity of their ideology by renouncing western secularism in contrast to the "organic" societal relationship a *dharmic* world order allegedly provides the individual.

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[46] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 165.
[47] Ibid., 167-168.
[48] "Bharatiya Janata Party: Integral Humanism."

By repudiating the west to uplift *dharma*, Hindu Nationalists present integral humanism as the only possible way to create a prosperous and "authentic" Hindu nation devoid of the negative influence of the west, and they also portray their Brahminical ideology as the only way to be "truly" Indian." In his discussion of *dharma*, Madhav draws a clear line between a Hindu and Indian identity and emphasizes the belief that there is a "correct" way to be Hindu. Evoking an integral humanist philosophy, he argues, "For the sake of the welfare of the clan, one has to readily give up his individuality."[49] Further, Madhav writes that according to Upadhyay, the individual should be " 'linked with the society.…We and I are the same. I am a Hindu; I am an Indian and I am a man. This is the crux of India's vision.' "[50] Given the Brahminical roots of Upadhyay's integral humanist worldview, when he says "Hindu," it is implied that he specifically means Brahminical Hindu. Thus, Upadhyay links Brahminical Hinduism not just with national identity but personal identity as well. He is setting up a construct in which rejecting Brahminical Hinduism subsequently rejects both an individual's Indian identity as well as India's so-called vision. As such, according to Upadhyay's logic, it is impossible to exist as an Indian without being Hindu. This rhetoric is politically advantageous for the Hindu Nationalist movement. However, given the hierarchical nature of the Brahminical *varna* social order, in an effort to gain populous support for the Hindu Nationalist religiopolitical ideology, simply equating Hindu and Indian does not suffice.

In order to appeal to larger swaths of the Indian population, Sangh Parivar rhetoric functions to erase the hierarchical differences within Brahminical ideology. When Upadhyay links an individual's (Brahminical) Hindu identity with a sense of national identity and

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[49] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 167.
[50] Upadhyay as cited in Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 167.

personhood ("I am a Hindu; I am an Indian and I am a man."[51]), he engages in a form of

rhetorical unification; by blurring the boundary between "We and I," Upadhyay's language

glosses over the hierarchies embedded within the stringent social order delineated within a

Brahminical Hindu worldview and implies a sense of leveling between everyone who identifies

as a Hindu Indian.

Although Hindu Nationalists attempt to broaden the appeal of their Brahminical ideology,

when addressing issues of caste-based discrimination, they avoid articulating how their

Brahminical worldview would remedy hierarchical oppression and instead focus on why they

believe caste-based discrimination exists in the first place. To do so, Hindu Nationalists make a

distinction between two different social structures in contemporary India: *varna* and *jati*. The

former they describe as a systematic Vedic "division of labor" and central to their Brahminical

political and social ideology. [52] In contrast, the latter they describe as a birth-based caste system

that makes up India's actual social groups. The *jati* system informs marriages and, according to

Hindu Nationalists, is the basis of modern discrimination.[53] Hindu Nationalists argue that

"westerners" and critics conflate the two terms, which results in a misattribution of the negative

components of *jati* with Hindu Nationalists' *varna*-centric ideology.[54]

Madhav explains the oppressive nature of *jati* by appealing to a narrative of western

influence, and he uses Plato's theory of "a tripartite division of the soul" to show how modern-

day *jati* differs from *varna*.[55] Madhav explains that "Plato had divided humanity into three

classes: labourers who produce material needs of society; soldiers who guard the state; and the

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Subramanian Swamy, "S1: 'Caste' is British Class Imposed on Indians," *The Festival of Bharat*, YouTube Video, August 24, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKBNXivo380.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 332.

rulers who rule.…The present-day caste system in India is a rigid-birth centric arrangement in line with Plato's classes."[56] Since Plato is easily recognized as an influential western philosopher, in Madhav's rhetoric, Plato can be understood to represent "the west" as a single entity. Based on this assumption, Madhav equates the negative components of caste in the modern world with Plato's categorization of society, thereby linking the west with the discriminatory components of Hindu castes.

When Madhav links the west with the deleterious aspects of the rigid modern caste system, he consequently expunges *varna* of any association with oppression and uplifts this Brahminical system as the only "pure" approach to creating a prosperous Hindu nation. Madhav argues that unlike *jati*, *varna* is "the most scientific principle of social organization" and through *varna*, "the Hindu perfected social organization."[57] Moreover, according to Hindu Nationalist politician Subramanian Swamy, the Vedic *varna* system was created so that "knowledge, weapons, wealth, and land" were equitably divided between groups in society and no one group possessed more than one of these valuable commodities. [58] Although these categories seem to resemble Plato's "tripartite division of the soul,"[59] Madhav argues that unlike *jati,* in which birth determines caste, individuals who work to gain knowledge of Brahminical texts and adhere to their *dharma* are able to move up the *varna* social ladder. Evoking both ancient Vedic texts as well as Adi Shankara, a medieval Vedic philosopher, Madhav writes,

> No one was high and no one low, to quote the *Rig Veda*.… "By birth all are Shudras.
> By actions men become Dwija—twice born.[60] By reading the Vedas, one becomes

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[56] Ibid.
[57] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 332.
[58] Subramanian Swamy, "S1: 'Caste' is British Class Imposed on Indians."
[59] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 332.
[60] The term "twice-born" refers to a "spiritual" initiation or rebirth, as it were, for members of the three highest castes in the *varna* system.

> Vipra and becomes Brahman by gaining the knowledge of God." For Adi Shankara, not birth but knowledge became the basis of social arrangement.[61]

Madhav establishes an illusion of *varna* as a meritocratic social order by propounding the belief that Brahmins equitably earn their high-ranking social position. When Madhav presents *varna* as a ranking system delineated by individual agency, he glosses over the reality that those who have access to these texts are typically the educated and literate elite castes, revealing the tautology embedded in his argument; in order to gain status in the *varna* social order, individuals must act according to the system itself. Thus, while Madhav presents *varna* as accessible to and surmountable by all castes, this narrative is a façade. In reality, his rhetoric functions to bolster a system that reinforces hierarchy and uplifts the privileged, high-caste Hindus. Further, it exemplifies Hindu Nationalist's explicit attempts to frame all Hindus as united and broaden the appeal of their Brahminical ideology.

HINDU NATIONALISM ON THE GROUND: LINKING HINDUISM WITH INDIAN PATRIOTISM

Hindu Nationalists assert that their religiopolitical ideology is equitable and beneficial for all Indians regardless of caste. This rhetoric supports the Sangh Parivar's mission to increase the Brahminical Hindu population, which would bolster the BJP's political constituency and ensure Hindu Nationalist political dominance. In a speech at the Dismantling Global Hindutva conference in September 2021, scholar Meena Kandasamy argued that Hindu Nationalist rhetoric attempts to unite all Hindus in contrast to a non-Hindu "other," and she illuminated the way this tactic is politically advantageous for the Hindu Nationalist movement. Kandasamy posited:

> Polarising as bloc [sic] of Hindus ensures the safety of the Brahmins, the tiny elite minority that benefits the most from Hindutva, it also allows everything that exists in India that is not Islamic or Christian to come under the single umbrella of 'Hindu'.…This

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[61] Madhav, *The Hindutva Paradigm*, 333.

sinister construction by the Sangh Parivar ensures that by default, the religion of the Brahmins, or rather, the religion that declares the supremacy of the Brahmins, becomes the religion of the majority of the people.[62]

Hindu Nationalist rhetoric attempts to obscure caste-based social discrimination and present Brahminical Hinduism as inclusive of *all* Hindus. This language allows the Brahmin and political elite to create a sense of a united Hindu identity and subsequently employ an "us versus them" dialogue to establish a Hindu nation and ensure Brahminical social and political supremacy.

Despite the Hindu Nationalist rhetoric of Hindu unity and equity, anti-caste activists have rejected the Sangh Parivar's glorification of *varna*. Historically and presently, low-caste and Dalit Hindus have used religious conversion as a means to both escape socioeconomic discrimination and as an act of anti-caste protest.[63] In 1936, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit anti-caste activist and former Indian Minister of Law, proclaimed, "I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, convert yourselves."[64] Twenty years later, Dr. Ambedkar explicitly rejected the Hindu caste system and famously led a mass conversion of over 300,000 Hindu Dalits to Buddhism in search of better social conditions. For Hindu Nationalists, conversion presents a problem since it both obstructs their mission to establish a Hindu majority in India and disrupts their narrative of Hindu unity which, as Kandasamy illuminates, is central to their strategy to ensure political supremacy.

[62] Meena Kandasamy, "From 'Sanatana Dharma' to 'Sangh Parivar,' " (Speech, Dismantling Global Hindutva: Virtual Conference. September 12, 2021), *Hindutva Watch*, https://hindutvawatch.org/from-sanatana-dharma-to-sangh-parivar-meena-kandasamy-on-the-evolution-of-political-hindutva/.
[63] Manjari Katju, "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi,' " *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 1 (2015): 21–24, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24481234.
[64] B.R. Ambedkar as cited in Adrija Roychowdhury, "Buddha Purnima: Why Ambedkar Converted to Buddhism," *The Indian Express*, May 8, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/buddha-purnima-special-why-ambedkar-coverted-to-buddhism-6397742/.

In order to push back against conversion and forward the Sangh Parivar's political goal, Hindu Nationalists perpetuate an anticolonial narrative and attempt to reinforce the association between Brahminical Hinduism and Indian patriotism by framing Christians and Muslims as proselytizing antagonists. The Sangh Parivar bases their anti-conversion rhetoric on the Hindutva belief that prior to British (Christian) and Mughal (Muslim) rule, Hindu society was in a "pristine position of eminence," and it was "during the millennial serfdom (800 years under Muslim suzerainty and 200 years of British rule), [that] the Hindus were also flung in a totally dark oblivion."[65] The Sangh Parivar draws on this imperial history to denounce mass conversion, framing it as a threat to India's prosperity and sovereignty and reminiscent of foreign rule. Political scientist Manjari Katju explains that "according to the leadership of the [Vishva Hindu Parishad], Christianity and Islam had plans 'to make Hindus a minority in India in the next 30 years; and…they want to establish their rule in India and completely destroy Hindu culture."[66] By drawing on an anticolonial narrative to frame Christianity and Islam as a threat to the wellbeing and prosperity of Hinduism, the Sangh Parivar links these minority religions with a history of foreign rule in India, in turn equating Indian patriotism with the Hindu Nationalist version of Hinduism.

The Sangh Parivar's opposition to conversion is not just rhetorical. Rather, the movement's legislative efforts to prevent individuals from leaving Hinduism illuminate the political motive undergirding Hindu Nationalists' anticolonial and patriotic rhetoric. Drawing on decades-old efforts to restrict conversion, in 2015 the BJP attempted to pass a national anti-conversion law that would " 'criminalise religious conversion without the government's

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[65]"The Inception of Vishva Hindu Parishad." Vishva Hindu Parishad - Official Website. Accessed November 2, 2021. https://vhp.org/organization/4/.
[66] Manjari Katju, "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi,' " 22.

consent.' "[67] While this bill did not pass at a national level, eight out of Indian's twenty-nine

states currently have anti-conversion laws in which individuals can incur significant fines and

possible arrest for converting from Hinduism to a "non-Indian" religion such as Christianity or

Islam.[68] In addition, the Sangh Parivar not only attempts to prevent conversion from Hinduism,

but through the *Ghar Wapsi* (lit. "return home") movement, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)

engages in efforts to "reconvert" non-Hindu Indians "back" to what they believe is their

"natural" Hindu identity.[69]

When Hindu Nationalists frame the *Ghar Wapsi* campaign as a spiritual and patriotic

"return" to Hindu *dharma*, their religious language functions as a tool to establish a Hindu nation

and curate an image of Hinduism as an inclusive, "truly Indian" identity. In order to carry out the

Ghar Wapsi campaign, the VHP targets socioeconomically disadvantaged low-caste Indians,

many of whom had originally converted away from Hinduism in search of better living

conditions. While the VHP recognizes the economic needs of its target population, and often

uses financial incentives to motivate individuals to "reconvert," the VHP describes conversion

(from Hinduism) not as an economic necessity but as a threat to Indians' safety and prosperity.

Chhattisgarh State Secretary Judev describes converts from Hinduism as "victims" who must be

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[67] State Anti-Conversion Laws in India," Law Library of Congress (Global Legal Research Directorate, October 2018): 3 https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llglrd/2018298841/2018298841.pdf.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Sumit Sarkar, "Conversions and Politics of Hindu Right," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 26 (1999): 1691–1700, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4408131.

"Anti-conversion" refers to the conversion *from* Hinduism to another religion, where as "reconversion" or *Ghar Wapsi* refers to the Hindu Nationalist campaign to convert individuals *to* Hinduism. *Ghar Wapsi* is a contemporary movement that resembles the fundamentalist Brahminical Hindu *Shuddhi* Movement of the early 20th century which similarly sought to "reconvert" individuals to Hinduism. The *Shuddhi* Movement was propounded by the Arya Samaj which differs from the Sangh Parivar. According to *The Caravan Magazine* in 2019, "The RSS has tried to ally with the Arya Samaj for decades now, but the two organisations have different visions for the country. The RSS aims to establish a Hindu Rashtra and the Arya Samaj's objective is to convert all citizens of the country to Arya Samajis and propagate the Vedas through its mission, Aryavrat" (Mandeep Punia, "The RSS's Endeavour to Subsume the Arya Samaj Is Reaching Fruition*," The Caravan*, June 30, 2019, https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rss-attempt-takeover-arya-samaj-english.)

saved by the *Ghar Wapsi* movement in order to return to Hindu *dharma*.[70] Judev argues that "Once one converts, his devotion to Mother India cannot remain the same.…Hindu is not a symbol of any caste or religion. It is a symbol of nationality."[71] Here Judev not only equates Hinduism with Indian patriotism, but he also frames Hinduism as all-encompassing of India society, irrespective of caste identity. Despite this rose-colored narrative that frames the VHP as a savior, in reality, the non-Hindu communities targeted for *Ghar Wapsi* often face threats and communal violence if they do not participate in the "reconversion" campaign. According to political scientist Manjari Katju, "ghar wapsi [sic] has unleashed violence and suffering on the target group as well as on the minority communities."[72] Thus, while Hindu Nationalists frame the movement as a spiritual and patriotic "return" to Hindu *dharma*, the force with which they execute the *Ghar Wapsi* campaign shows how, underlying the Sangh Parivar's positive rhetoric, is the intention to establish a Hindu nation no matter the means.

Moreover, the *Ghar Wapsi* movement relies on an anti-western and Islamophobic sentiment in an effort to increase the Hindu population and establish a Hindu nation. In 2015, VHP General Secretary Champat Rai argued that "all minorities in India have converted from Hinduism" and *Ghar Wapsi* is necessary to bring individuals "back to their ancestral traditions."[73] This rhetoric links Hinduism with the idea of a genuine Indian identity and implicitly undermines the legitimacy and patriotism of non-Hindu Indians. Further,

> In the words of VHP leader Pravin Togadia, the VHP "is committed to ensuring
> the population of Hindus in this country doesn't fall before the current level of

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[70] OpIndia Staff, "'Ghar Wapsi' in Chattisgarh."

[71] Prabal Pratap Singh Judev as cited in "After the death of the father, the son who got 10000 'ghar wapsi', Charan Pakhar is bringing the tribals to the original religion: Meet Prabal Pratap Judev," *OpIndia*, November 22, 2021, translated to English by Google Translate, April 25, 2022, https://hindi.opindia.com/national/dilip-singh-judev-son-prabal-pratap-ghar-wapsi-campaign-hinduism-chhattisgarh-christian-missionary/.

[72] Manjari Katju, "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi,'" 23.

[73] Pratul Sharma, "VHP Claims Huge Success in 'Ghar Wapsi' Campaign," *The New Indian Express*, July 6, 2015, https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2015/jul/05/VHP-Claims-Huge-Success-in-Ghar-Wapsi-Campaign-779319.html.

> 82%…we won't let their population decline from 82 to 42% because then their property and women will not remain safe." He further said "…the whole world was once inhabited by Hindus" and that his organisation "will strive to increase the population of Hindu in India from 82% to 100%."[74]

Since the VHP is primarily working to prevent and counteract conversions to Islam and Christianity, when Togadia argues that an increase in conversion is inversely correlated with the safety of property and women, he is implicitly equating an "external other" with the decline of Hindu prosperity. Furthermore, Togadia's focus on the Hindu population as a percentage reflects the quantitative political intentions underlying the religious overtones of the *Ghar Wapsi* campaign and demonstrates how Hindu Nationalists utilize religious rhetoric for their political gain.

MIRRORING THE BRITISH: THE FALLACY OF HINDU NATIONALIST RHETORIC

Anticolonial sentiment appears to permeate all aspects of Hindu Nationalist religiopolitical rhetoric, and it serves to establish Brahminical Hinduism as a "purely" Indian system, uncontaminated by the nefarious impact of imperial rule. However, despite the explicit ways that Hindu Nationalist rhetoric rejects external influence, the idea of Brahminical superiority did not pre-exist colonial rule. Rather, the British colonists reified Brahminical Hinduism as the only legitimate form of Hindu practice. Ironically, Hindu Nationalist rhetoric not only appears to align with this colonial conception of so-called legitimate Hinduism, but the Sangh Parivar uses this British idea to secure political power. According to historian Brain Pennington, "The bureaucratization of the colonial state abetted the reification of Hinduism. In the twentieth century, Hindu nationalists, it has been regularly observed, awoke to the political

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[74] Manjari Katju, "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi,' " 23.

fruits that the concept of a nationally and historically cohesive tradition could yield."[75] That is to say, the consolidation of Hinduism into a homogenized and monolithic Brahminical form occurred under British rule.[76] Hindu Nationalists recognized the political advantages of creating a so-called unified Hindu identity and have "thereby sought to manufacture a certain historical integrity and communal unity for all of India."[77] Despite explicitly rejecting both western social systems as well as western influence, Hindu Nationalist political rhetoric appears to reflect colonial tactics of securing political and social power.

The *Ghar Wapsi* movement is a clear example of how Hindu Nationalist ideology builds on British colonial political strategies. As described above, central to the VHP's rhetoric around *Ghar Wapsi* is an "us versus them" narrative that frames Hinduism in contrast to an external religious "other." This strategy of denouncing one group in order to affirm the superiority of another exemplifies scholar Prashant Waikar's analysis of how colonial powers endeavored to consolidate the definition of Hinduism for colonial political gain. Waikar posits that "In South Asia, a critical manifestation of colonial racialization was the grouping of people into mutually antagonistic and indeed, monolithic religious categories of Hindus and Muslims."[78] Distinguishing between two distinct ethnoreligious groups allowed the British to pursue a divide and conquer approach to ruling over the South Asian subcontinent and prevent the Hindu and Muslim communities from joining forces in opposition to British colonial rule. Through the *Ghar Wapsi* movement, as Hindu Nationalists attempt to realize their political mission of establishing India as a Hindu nation, their Hindu versus Muslim rhetoric appears to parallel that

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[75] Brian Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and Colonial Construction of Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 169.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Waikar, "Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva," 166.

of the British. When discussing *Ghar Wapsi*, Manjari Katju claims that "for the Sangh Parivar conversion to Hinduism is about display of community strength in their imaginary competition for power with other religious communities."[79] When *Ghar Wapsi* is considered in light of Waikar's argument, the campaign can be understood to utilize colonial monolithic ethnoreligious categorizations, exemplifying how Hindu Nationalists' so-called anticolonial and patriotic rhetoric perpetuates a British political legacy.

This points to the theory of mimetic nationalism which contends that time and again post-colonial states adopt nationalist ideologies while stating they repudiate the influence of the former colonial power.[80] However, as scholar of religion Bruce B. Lawrence writes, "the greatest failure of mimetic nationalism is that it left each of the colonized countries…with the illusion that they could reclaim both identity and purity as nation-states.….Having ended foreign domination, they could claim to have banished the hated foreigner. Yet the foreigner did not go away."[81] This paradox is apparent in Hindu Nationalist rhetoric; when the texts analyzed in this paper discuss *dharma*—and its central role in the theory of integral humanism—as well as a Hindu identity more broadly, they oppose "western" worldviews in order to situate their ideology as the "purest" and "most Indian" form of Hinduism. However, they fail to acknowledge that, "the European conception of Hinduism was mediated by Sanskrit texts to formulate a body of 'legitimate' accounts of Hinduism and form the 'Holy Book' of a singular Hindu civilization."[82] Just like the British colonizers, contemporary Hindu Nationalists view Brahminical Hinduism as the only "true" form of Hindu identity. In line with the theory of mimetic nationalism, Hindu

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[79] Manjari Katju, "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi,' " 24.
[80] Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam beyond Violence*, (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1998).
[81] Ibid., 49.
[82] Manisha Basu, *The Rhetoric of Hindu India: Language and Urban Nationalism*. (Illinois: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 8, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316576540.

Nationalists position their beliefs in direct opposition to the "west" in an attempt to legitimize an ideology that, ironically, the west itself has historically shared.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have examined the ways in which Hindu Nationalist leaders and Sangh Parivar organizations use divine language and situate their ideology in opposition to "the west" in order to assert that Brahminical Hinduism is the superior and most "Indian" version of Hinduism. Ram Madhav and the BJP focus on the critical role *dharma* plays in the integral humanist approach to creating a Brahminical Hindu nation. By juxtaposing *dharma* with any sort of western social order, whether it be the Hindu Nationalists' interpretation of a western definition of religion, or their perception of so-called secular and individualistic western culture, Hindu Nationalist rhetoric appears to define "Hindu" as whatever the west is not. That is to say, Hindu Nationalists strive to reify their Brahminical worldview as the "truest" manifestation of Hindu identity. They do so by rejecting the idea that *dharma*, the central component of their political and religious ideology, could be constrained in any way by the bounds of a western linguistic framework. Further, Hindu Nationalist rhetoric engages with ancient Brahminical texts to reinforce an integral humanist nation-building political agenda; simultaneously it references Plato as a scapegoat to equate the negative components of modern caste with a western frame of thinking and uplift *varna* in the process. In doing so, Hindu Nationalists situate the west (as they perceive it) and its colonial legacy as a threat to Indian society. They strive to position *dharma*, integral humanism, and a Brahminical worldview more broadly as the only acceptable ways to create a "pure" Hindu nation devoid of any harmful western influence.

Moreover, the Sangh Parivar's political mission to establish a Hindu nation is exemplified in the VHP's rhetoric and actions related to the *Ghar Wapsi* campaign, as well as

through the BJP's legislative efforts to restrict conversion away from Hinduism. To denounce

conversion, Hindu Nationalists draw on India's history as a subject of imperial rule, and, just as

they linked the negative aspects of *jati* and the west, they frame any form of external influence as

a fundamental threat to India's safety and national sovereignty. This rhetoric links Indian

patriotism with Hinduism and subsequently frames all converts (who converted from Hinduism)

and non-Hindu Indians as, by definition, opposed to a sovereign and prosperous Indian nation.

Although Hindu Nationalists protest against the idea that the west's definition of religion

could in any way resemble their understanding of *dharma*, ironically, they omit from the

conversation the historical reality that British colonizers shifted the definition of "acceptable"

Hinduism. The British belief that Brahminical Hinduism was the superior manifestation of the

religion is analogous to Hindu Nationalists' contemporary definition of Hinduism, and Sangh

Parivar political rhetoric repeatedly attempts to uphold this colonial perception. So, while the

Sangh Parivar claims that Brahminical Hinduism has been uncontaminated by India's long

history of imperial influence, and thus building a nation according to an integral humanist

worldview is the only way to create a "purely Indian" nation, this narrative obscures the reality

that a single "legitimate" form of Hinduism was originally reified by British colonizers. Thus,

despite Hindu Nationalists' anticolonial narrative, the movement's religiopolitical ideology

reflects vestiges of mimetic nationalism. In turn, while Hindu Nationalist rhetoric propounds a

myth of equity and social mobility, in practice the movement's ideology upholds an oppressive

Brahminical social hierarchy and promotes a colonial project that established Brahminical

Hinduism as the most "authentic" form of Hindu tradition. Finally, since the BJP currently holds

a parliamentary majority in India, Hindu Nationalists' religiopolitical rhetoric has real-time

implications for India's political landscape. Thus, analyzing the Sangh Parivar's language is

critical for understanding the socioeconomic and cultural ramifications of Hindutva political

ideology.

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I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment

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