HINDUTVA’S SACRED COWS

Vinay Lal

The lynching of five dalits—Virender, Dayanand, Kailash, Raju Gupta and Tota Ram—in Jhajjar (Haryana), reportedly by a frenzied mob, for skinning a dead cow is yet another pointer to the criminality that marks mob behaviour, thanks to the communal manipulation of mass religiosity by those who wish to thrive by it. . . . The disturbing truth is that a 5000-strong mob could collect at the drop of a hat to Lynch those who skinned a dead cow. But it is doubtful if there would be even five among them willing to mind living cows that need care and protection. . . . We do not know how the cow in the present episode died; whether someone other than the five victims killed it or whether it died of starvation, street accident, old age or sickness. It is almost certain that no one among the murderous mob asked this question. Nor would it have occurred to them that being a friend to cows involves much more than being enemies of the enemies of cows.

Swami Agnivesh and Valsa Thampu (2002)

Among contemporary social reformers in India, the Indian monk Swami Agnivesh is a widely recognised figure. Agnivesh gained prominence three decades ago for his efforts in bringing to attention the problems of bonded and child labour in India. The Bandhua Mukti Marcha, or Bonded Labour Liberation Front, which he founded in 1981 while he was still serving as Minister of Education in the state of Haryana, became known for carrying out daring rescues of labourers bonded for life, for instance many of those working in the quarries around Delhi. Agnivesh became the public face of India in international forums on the abolition of slavery, but he has also intervened over the years on many other social issues, from female feticide and the Hindu rite of widow immolation to corruption and the Indian state’s relation to Maoist revolutionaries.
It is Agnivesh’s pronouncements on Hinduism, however, which make him a particularly arresting figure and help illustrate the difficulties in unraveling that strange phenomenon called ‘Hindu Fundamentalism’. Though Agnivesh is what would generally be recognised as a Hindu monk in India, he is a member of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 with the explicit intention of returning Hinduism back to its purportedly Vedic roots. Dayanand held that much of what passed for ‘Hinduism’ was a later and corrupt accretion, and the Arya Samaj came to reject many of the practices associated with Hinduism but held to be without Vedic sanction, such as idol worship, animal sacrifice, and child marriage. Most controversially, leading members of the Arya Samaj became proponents of the distinctly un-Hindu idea of shuddhi, or the conversion of Muslims to Hinduism, arguing that they were only encouraging Muslims to return to the fold (parivartan) from which they had departed. Agnivesh himself has been derided by Hindu nationalists as anti-Hindu, and his declaration in 2005 that the famous Jagannath Temple in Puri should be opened to non-Hindus led to his being burnt in effigy. He has been similarly controversial on other phenomena which have a centrality in the cultural imagination of Hinduism, such as the annual and rather arduous pilgrimage to the Amarnath cave in Kashmir where an ice stalagmite is worshipped as a form of the deity Lord Shiva, rubbished as Agnivesh’s as a piece of ice.

Swami Agnivesh, then, scarcely appears to be a figure that one would lump among the Hindu fundamentalists; indeed, judging from remarks he made at a gathering in 2008 organised by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, where he pronounced the United States ‘the terrorist number one’, and stated unequivocally that nothing could be a ‘bigger lie’ than attributing the wrongdoings of a few Muslims ‘to the whole community’, Agnivesh would appear to be hostile to Hindu fundamentalists who subscribe to the idea that though not all Muslims are terrorists, most terrorists are certainly Muslims. Yet, as a close perusal of Agnivesh’s writings suggest, he often summons arguments or advances ideas in which Hindu nationalists have been trading for many years. There is, for example, a perennial argument from demography: while in India Muslims have retained their share of the population since 1947, doubling in numbers, the Hindu population of Bangladesh has declined from 25 per cent to about 10 per cent, and from 10 per cent to 1 per cent in Pakistan in the same period of time. This decline, Agnivesh argues, has been precipitated both by the ‘tolerant philosophical outlook’ of the Hindus and the evident intolerance of Muslims. The Hindu is slowly awakening to the fact that the ‘basic tenet of this faith [Islam] is to conquer and subdue the whole world in the name of Allah’, and Hindus and Buddhists, having seen ‘the loss of Hindu influence from Iran to Indonesia to proselytising Islam’, are no longer willing to be persuaded that the Quranic injunction of ‘You have your religion, I have mine’, has ever been taken seriously by Muslims.

Everything in Hinduism, argues Agnivesh, militates against the idea of Hindu fundamentalism, which is in any case ‘to a great extent a reaction to national and international Muslim fundamentalism’. What is characterised as Hindu fundamentalism is in fact the everyday ordinariness of a religion such as Islam, and ‘even the slightest spiritual movement among the Hindus is immediately branded by the minority communities as Hindu-chauvinism, Hindu backlash or fundamentalism.’ For Agnivesh, as for many others, including those who can by no means be viewed as tolerant of religious extremism, the very notion of Hindu fundamentalism is altogether unintelligible: in Agnivesh’s words, ‘no scripture is absolutely authoritative for all Hindus, not even the Vedas since the highest realisation is always considered above scriptural knowledge.’ Agnivesh might well have added what many would concede: even the very idea of a ‘Hindu’ is relatively recent, for those who today are termed Hindus would never have described themselves as such before the eighteenth century. The influential ideologue of Hinduutva (the essence of being Hindu, or Hinduess, more often rendered in English as ‘Hindu nationalism’), Vinayak Savarkar, was forthright on this matter, insisting that there is ‘no word such as Hindu in Sanskrit, the language in which the texts of “Hinduism” have been written. The Vedas or the Upanishads or even the Bhagavad Gita do not mention the Hindus. To the best of our knowledge, none of the Samitis [law books] or the Puranas [mythological works] talk of Hindu Dharma or the Hindus.’

How is one to speak of Hindu fundamentalism when Hinduism recognises no single text as supremely authoritative, has multiple centres of priestly authority all of which a practitioner of the faith may however ignore without peril, counts ‘330 million’ gods and goddesses in its pantheon, and is certainly without a historical founder? Some scholars, however sympathetic they may be to such idioms of thought, find this an idle line of reasoning and prefer to argue from the history on the ground. They point to the manner in which the so-called Sangh Parivar, a family of closely knit organi-
sations, has given form to Hindu nationalism, advanced ideological agendas designed to turn India into a Hindu rashtra (nation), mobilised Hindus around critical social and political issues, and orchestrated terror against religious minorities. They have in mind the work performed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which represents the interests of Hindus in electoral politics; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), often described as a paramilitary organisation that does the ideological, cultural, and sometimes public service work of Hinduism; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which is the cultural, quasi-diplomatic, and ‘missionary’ arm of modern-day Hindus; and an array of other, generally smaller, organisations. Yet, as I shall now argue, there may be other, often less explored, avenues for understanding the contours of ‘Hindu fundamentalism’.

**Hitler in India**

*Mein Kampf*, which by law cannot be sold in Germany, has what without exaggeration can justly be described as a big market in India. In a country where the sale of 5,000 copies is enough to warrant a title’s inclusion in the best-seller list, it is notable that a reprint of *Mein Kampf* by the Indian publisher Jaico had, as of June 2010, sold over 100,000 copies in ten years. When we consider that the book is also sold on the pavement in various pirated editions, the real sales figures are bound to be much higher. London’s *Daily Telegraph*, in an article published on 20 April 2009, first drew attention to this phenomenon with a striking headline: ‘Indian business students snap up copies of *Mein Kampf*.’ Notwithstanding anything that Sir William Jones might have said in the late eighteenth century on the common Aryan links between Indians and Germans, or the Nazi theorist Alfred Rosenberg’s views on India as the ancestral home of the Aryans, Indian students appeared to have eschewed the grand historical narratives that have animated so many intellectuals for something seemingly much more pragmatic. The same articles informs its readers that sales of *Mein Kampf* have been soaring in India as Hitler is regarded as a ‘management guru’, an opinion apparently derived from conversations with several booksellers and students. The owner of Mumbai’s Embassy Books, who reprints *Mein Kampf* ‘every quarter’, explained that Indians read in the book ‘a kind of a success story where one man can have a vision, work out a plan on how to implement it and then successfully complete it’. A related BBC article, which appeared a year later, quotes a nineteen-year-old Gujarati student, ‘I have idolised Hitler ever since I have had a sense of history. I admire his leadership qualities and his discipline.’

Hitler’s popularity in India arises from a conjuncture of circumstances. In India, and in much of the rest of the world, it has become commonplace to view Hitler as the supreme embodiment of evil in the twentieth century, just as Mohandas Gandhi is likely to be seen as the greatest instantiation of good. The cover of a recent issue of *Time* (3 December 2007) sums up this opposition quite well: on the left side of a large sketch of the brain is a hologram showing Gandhi, and on the right side is a hologram featuring Hitler. The cover story is entitled, ‘What Makes Us Good/Evil’, and the caption accompanying the story states: ‘Humans are the planet’s most noble creatures — and its most savage. Science is discovering why.’ In the land of his own birth, nevertheless, Gandhi appears to have been eclipsed by Hitler, and the comparative sales of *Mein Kampf* and Gandhi’s autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, with the former outselling the latter by a margin of nearly two to one at the Crossword chain of bookstores, is only one of the telltale signs of the diminishing place of Gandhi in the country’s public life. The young who idolise Hitler’s life as a model of ‘leadership qualities’ and ‘discipline’ evidently have little knowledge of the manner in which Gandhi left his huge impress upon the anti-colonial struggle, forging a mass movement of nonviolent resistance that at times displayed an extraordinarily high level of discipline, and transforming the principal nationalist organisation, the Indian National Congress, from a party of elites into a body of mass politics. Yet, if there were misgivings about Gandhi in his own lifetime, many of those have become aggravated in an India which views Gandhi as a backward-looking luddite who emasculated India and would have set the country hopelessly adrift in a nation-state system where national interest and violence reign supreme. In such a setting, Hitler’s idea of a virile nation set on a course of domination appears as an attractive alternative, even if it left Germany smoldering in ruins.

One might also suppose that it is only natural that Hitler should have a constituency in Mumbai, large chunks of which are under the control of Shiv Sena, a political party comprised in good part of hoodlums who appear to have learned something about both terror tactics and racial ideologies of hate from the Nazis. However, as empirical and anecdotal experience alike
suggest, copies of Mein Kampf have sold well in other parts of the country, and as the BBC article noted, the more pertinent fact is perhaps that ‘the more well-heeled the area, the higher the sales.’ The Indian middle class has been strongly inclined to view admirably countries such as Germany and Japan, the success of which, most particularly after the end of World War II left them in ruins, is held up as an example of what discipline, efficiency, and strenuous devotion to work can accomplish. Of Japan’s atrocities in the war very little is known in India, and the middle class gaze has seldom travelled beyond what is signified by the names of Sony, Toyota, Honda, Mitsubishi, and the like; as for Hitler, the same middle class Indians marvel at his ability to command millions, forge an extraordinary war machine, and nearly take a country humiliated at the end of World War I to the brink of victory over India’s own colonial master.

There is, however, an equal measure of truth and falsity in the Daily Telegraph’s assessment of the mutual influence of India and Hitler’s Nazis on one another. Mahatma Gandhi corresponded with the Fuhrer, pro-independence leader Subhas Chandra Bose’s Indian National Army allied with Hitler’s Germany and Japan during the Second World War, and the Nazis drew on Hindu symbolism for their Swastika motif and ideas of Aryan supremacy. Gandhi addressed two brief letters to Hitler, urging the German leader to renounce war and take advantage of his unparalleled sway over the masses to usher in a new era of nonviolence. But by no means can this be described as a ‘correspondence’ with the Fuhrer: exercising its wartime prerogatives of censorship, the British Government of India ensured that neither letter reached the addressee. Hitler never wrote to Gandhi. On the other hand, the invocation of Subhas Chandra Bose, who commenced his political career in awe of Gandhi but came to a parting of ways with the Mahatma, may perhaps go some ways in explaining the attraction felt for Hitler among India’s youth. Bose is revered nearly as much as Gandhi in India, and certainly has fewer critics; lionised for his relentless opposition to British rule, which eventually led him to an opportunistic alliance with the fascists, Bose is remembered most of all for the creation of the Indian National Army. In a daring escape while he was under house arrest in Calcutta, Bose eventually made his way to Berlin where he founded the Indian Legion, comprised of Indian POWs captured in North Africa and attached initially to the Wehrmacht. Its members, significantly, were bound to an oath of allegiance which clearly establishes the nexus between Hitler and Bose: ‘I swear by God this holy oath that I will obey the leader of the German race and state, Adolf Hitler, as the commander of the German armed forces in the fight for India, whose leader is Subhas Chandra Bose.’ It is an equally telling fact that Hitler had little interest in granting Bose an audience, only agreeing to a short meeting more than a year after Bose’s arrival in Berlin—a meeting at which Hitler refused to issue a statement in support of India’s independence. It was well and good for F. Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Goethe, W. von Humboldt, Herder, Schopenhauer, and other exemplars of German enlightenment to celebrate the stupendous intellectual achievements of the ancient Hindus, but it was also not to be forgotten that India was a living testament to the degeneracy to which the eastern branch of the Aryans had fallen when they failed to preserve their purity.

If the troubled relationship of a nationalist hero with the Nazis is insufficient to explain Hitler’s privileged place in the middle class Indian imagination, we may turn with greater success to the writings of Hindutva’s principal ideologues. At the annual session in 1940 of the Hindu Mahasabha, a political party founded to promote the political interests of the Hindus and advance the idea of a Hindu rashtra (nation), Savarkar, in his Presidential Address, described Nazism as ‘undeniably the saviour of Germany under the circumstances in which Germany was placed’. Though Savarkar’s admirers describe him as a man of great intellectual acumen, it is remarkable that his only riposte to Jawaharlal Nehru, who throughout remained a vigorous critic of both Nazism and fascism, was to argue that ‘Hitler knows better than Pandit Nehru what suits Germany best’: ‘The very fact that Germany or Italy has so wonderfully recovered and grown so powerful as never before at the touch of Nazi or Fascist magical wand is enough to prove that those political “isms” were the most congenial tonics their health demanded.’ M. S. Golwalkar, who presided over the RSS from 1940 to 1973 and became the chief spokesperson for the idea of a Hindu nation, was similarly moved to argue that ‘the other nation [besides Italy] most in the eye of the world today is Germany. The nation affords a very striking example’. That spirit which had enabled ancient German tribes to overrun Europe was once again alive in modern Germany which, building on the ‘traditions left by its depredatory ancestors’, had taken possession of the territory that was its by right but had, ‘as a result of political disputes’, been ‘portioned off as different countries under different states.’
Nazism was built, however, on the twin foundations of expansion and contraction: if the idea of Lebensraum became the pretext for the bold acquisition of territories, Germany itself was to be purified of its noxious elements, principally the Jews but other undesirables as well, among them gypsies, homosexuals, communists, and mental retards. The treatment meted out to Jews was, from the standpoint of those desirous of forging a glorious Hindu nation, an object lesson on how Hindu India might handle its own Muslims. Much ink has been spilled on just who all were the advocates of the two-nation theory in India, though Savarkar is clearly implicated. 'India cannot be assumed today to be a unitarian and homogeneous nation,' he told his audience while delivering the Presidential Address to the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937; rather, 'on the contrary, there are two nations in the main: the Hindus and the Moslems, in India.' These two nations, moreover, did not stand on the same footing, as the Hindu alone recognised Hindusthan as his or her pitribhu (fatherland), matribhru (motherland), and punyabhru (holyland); the Muslim, his eyes always looking beyond Hindusthan, was a rank outsider. The fate of Indian Muslims was sealed: as Gokhalkar put it unequivocally, 'the foreign elements in Hindusthan' had but 'two courses' of action open to them, entertaining 'no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race,' or they were to live 'wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment not even citizen's rights.' In all this, Gokhalkar held up Germany as a country that might usefully be emulated by India: 'Germany has also shown how impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by.'

Cartographic Piety

15 November is one of the more significant if less recognised dates in the calendar of some Hindu extremists. Each year since 1950, a strange ceremony has been carried out that day in the city of Pune, recognised as a citadel of Brahmin orthodoxy and Hindu learning. Pune is one of the principal seats of the Chitpavan Brahmans, a highly influential community that, over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, saw a precipitous decline in its fortunes. It is in Pune that the first attempt to assassinate Mohandas Gandhi took place in 1934, and it is from the ranks of Pune’s Chitpavan community that Gandhi’s eventual assassin, Nathuram Godse, arose to put an end to the life of an old man whom he was to designate as the greatest foe of the Hindus. In the early hours of the morning of 15 November 1949, close to two years after the murder of Gandhi, Nathuram and his associate, Narayan Apte, were escorted from death row in Ambala Central Jail and taken to the gallows. As Nathuram took the last few steps of his life, chanting a hymn to the motherland, he clutched a map of undivided India in one hand and a saffron flag in the other.

Nathuram’s admirers, and they are legion, gather together every 15 November to recall the martyrdom of the assassin. Gandhi may have been the ‘Father of the Nation’, but Nathuram was quite certain that he was to be held chiefly responsible both for the vivisection of an ancient land and for making the Hindus vulnerable to the depredations of the Muslims. Though the circumstances of Gandhi’s assassination have been probed by numerous government agencies and inquiry commissions, and Gandhi’s innumerable biographers have endlessly gone over many of the details of the assassination plot and the outcome of the protracted trial in which Nathuram and several others would be implicated, the cartographic piety in which Nathuram’s life is encased has received little scrutiny. Nathuram’s last letter from jail, dated 12 November, had ended with the following words: ‘Akhand Bharat Amar Rahel! Vande Mataram!’ (‘Long Live Undivided India! Hail the Motherland!’)

At the 15 November ceremony in Pune each year, the portraits of Nathuram and Apte are inset in a map of ‘Akhand Bharat’, undivided India, and then garlanded; lamps are lit, one for each year that has passed since their death, and an aarti — a Hindu ritual of worship — is performed; and those present take a pledge to work towards the fulfillment of Nathuram’s dream of a ‘unified India’. Reports published in Indian newspapers and magazines have over the years added some further details: Nathuram’s ashes, for instance, are still preserved by his family members, kept in a pot which is placed before the map of ‘Akhand Bharat’. Nathuram had left behind instructions that his ashes were to be immersed in the Sindh river only after the partition of India had been revoked and the river had once again become part of India.
The idea of cartographic war as another mode of conducting politics is familiar to us from large parts of the world. India and Pakistan have long fought a cartographic war, and well-known tourist guides to India, such as Lonely Planet’s *India Travel Survival Kit*, are only allowed to be sold in India on the condition that the map of India reproduced in the guide is accompanied by a special stamp stating that the borders shown in the map do not reflect the view of the Government of India regarding its own territorial borders. The Survey of India, which was established in 1767 and is charged with giving accurate topographic expression to India’s borders, states that ‘publication of maps depicting inaccurate external boundaries and coastlines of India is tantamount to questioning the territorial integrity of India and is a cognisable offence under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1961.’

Cartographic espionage falls under the rubric of the Official Secrets Act (1923), and the government’s extreme reticence in allowing the sale of topographic maps even to Indian citizens became more pronounced in the wake of China’s cartographic offensive, followed by a swift blitzkrieg in 1962 that sent India’s armed forces into a tailspin, over the north-east Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh which China claims as part of its territory.

We might say that a related kind of cartographic anxiety has been at the heart of Hindutva, well before the partition of India was announced by the colonial regime as the logical culmination of Indian history. By the late nineteenth century, there was some awareness among the educated elite of the idea of a ‘Greater India’. The Bengali intelligentsia might have imagined itself as the vanguard of a new Indian cosmopolitanism, but for centuries before the advent of the European presence in India the vast Indian Ocean trading system had drawn into its fold an impressive array of players, among them Gujaratis, Konkanese, Sumatrans, Malays, Chinese, Arabs and many others. There was perhaps only a dim recollection, which nationalists would attempt to energise, of India’s sway over much of Southeast Asia and the Indianisation, over many centuries, of the Malay archipelago, Java, Kampuchea, and Indochina. However anomalous it might have appeared to suppose that a subject people could once have presided over a large empire, it was a marvel that India had brought its weight to bear upon others not by dint of arms but rather by the force of its cultural, spiritual, and intellectual legacies. Perhaps the real task of Hindu nationalism would be to reclaim the world it had lost — not so much to the British, as to the Muslim, invader?

The ‘political testament’ of Har Dayal, published in 1925, makes for arresting reading in this respect. He does not figure prominently in most intellectual histories of Hindutva; to the contrary, he is more warmly remembered as the founder of the Ghadr party, a political organisation that, from its multiple locations in the Indian diaspora and beyond, sought to liberate India from colonial rule. Writing in the Lahore-based Urdu newspaper the *Pratap*, Har Dayal declared that ‘the future of the Hindu race, of Hindustan and of the Punjab, rests on these four pillars: (1) Hindu Sanga- than [organisation], (2) Hindu Raj [rule]; (3) Shuddhi [reconversion] of Muslims, and (4) Conquest and Shuddhi of Afghanistan and the frontiers. So long as the Hindu nation does not accomplish these four things, the safety of our children and great-grandchildren will be ever in danger, and the safety of the Hindu race will be impossible.’ It is remarkable that, at a time when even the independence of India was far from becoming a political reality, Har Dayal should have been thinking of the Hindu ‘conquest’ of Afghanistan — ‘formerly part of India’ but ‘at present under the domination of Islam’ — and the reconversion of its Muslims to Hinduism. Har Dayal would go on to argue that, unless Hindus secured the frontiers for themselves, it would be ‘useless to win Swaraj’: ‘mountain tribes are always warlike and hungry’, and there would be nothing to prevent the emergence of Muslim tyrants at India’s borders. Har Dayal draws the lesson home with an explicit agenda: ‘If Hindus want to protect themselves, they must conquer Afghanistan and the frontiers and convert all the mountain tribes.’

For all his ambition, Har Dayal’s conception of ‘Greater India’ was rather modest, animated by a concern to secure India’s borders and perhaps restore a Hindu empire that might once have stretched to Afghanistan. The question of an ‘Asian civilisation’ was very much in the air, prompted by Japan’s triumph over Russia in 1905, enhanced exchanges between Asian intellectuals, a profound disenchantment with the idea of Europe after the brutalities of the ‘Great War’, and the rise of anti-colonial movements. Hindutva’s ideologues had something else in mind when they thought of ‘Greater India’, Asia, or the notion of empires. Savarkar had advanced his own definition of a Hindu as one who looked upon the land that extended from the Indus to the seas as his fatherland (pitribhu) and motherland (matribhu), and further considered Sindusthan as his holyland (punyabhu) besides claiming inheritance from his Aryan forefathers, but in practice there were sometimes a complicated set of considerations that determined
one's fitness to be a Hindu. He permitted Parsis the privilege of being considered Hindus, or at least akin to them, presumably because of the shared Aryan ancestry, even though they did not view India as punyabhu, or holy territory. Hindus who had moved overseas need not fear being considered anything less than the Hindus at home, and he even urged ‘our colonists’ to ‘continue unabated their labours of founding a Greater India, a Mahabharat, to the best of their capacities’ — and why not, for ‘the only geographical limits to Hinduuta are the limits of our earth!’ Golwalkar, expounding on the same theme, thought it unnecessary to test the limits of imagination; it would suffice if the Hindu were acquainted with his history. Once the Hindu was made aware of his glorious past, it would dawn on him that ‘our arms stretched as far as America on the one side — that was long before Columbus “discovered” America — and on the other side to China, Japan, Cambodia, Malaya, Siam, Indonesia, and all the South-East Asian countries and right up to Mongolia and Siberia in the North. Our powerful political empire too spread over these South-East areas and continued for 1400 years.’ This would be the true realisation of Akhand Bharat, the reuni-

fication of Indians in America with their brethren in the primordial Aryan homeland of India.

**Diasporic Aggression**

There is now a ‘Greater India’ that exceeds even the fertile imagination of Savarkar, Golwalkar, and Godse’s followers. One of the questions discussed on Hinduuta websites, initially spurred by the extravagant claims of the writer P. N. Oak, who was of the view that nothing worthwhile in India had been achieved which did not have the stamp of Hindu origin, is whether Denmark might not be considered yet another outpost of the adventurous and bovine-loving Hindus. On this reasoning, Denmark is derived from the two Sanskrit words ‘Dhenu’ and ‘marg’, or the way of the cow; and since Denmark is particularly rich in dairy products, the claim has appeared to some Hindus of fecund mind as not lacking credibility. Oak and his followers have also given it as their opinion that Argentina may have been one of the many places visited by the Pandava prince Arjuna — hence Arjuna Town, or Argentina — as he traveled incognito during his period of exile, just as the word Vatican is derived from the Sanskrit vatika, meaning hermitage. The Hindus seem to have been prolific travelers, and the intent partly

seems to be to respond with vengeance to colonial representations of Indian society as parochial and stagnant.

A different conception, and one that merits serious attention, of a ‘Greater India’ has begun to emerge in more recent years, one that sees especially North American Hindus as the vanguard of a resuscitated and rejuvenant Hinduism. There are many chapters in this narrative, indeed far too many to be recounted here, but the broad contours of how Hindu fundamentalism — and here fundamentalism may not be a misplaced word, considering the fact that Christian fundamentalism in the US presents itself as a tacit template for Hindus struggling with the idea of how they might serve their own faith — has acquired a force and presence in the ‘land of the free and home of the brave’ may be understood by gesturing briefly at some discrete but related phenomena. What is called ‘Hinduism’ has effectively only been present on American shores since the immigration reforms of 1965 made it possible for Indians to migrate to the US in large numbers, even if, as is widely known, Hindu sages and yogis had been visiting the US since at least the time of Swami Vivekananda. It would take another generation before Hindus in the US, whose increase in numbers can be gauged by, as an illustration, the growth of temples, felt sufficiently emboldened to interest themselves in American politics, lobby Congress to adopt policies favourable to India, or take firm positions on matters of some political, economic or social urgency in India itself.

In December 1992, the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque supposedly built on the site of a Hindu temple marking the exact birth spot (janamasthan) of the revered deity king, Lord Ram, was destroyed. Extremist Hindus had argued that the mosque was an eternal reminder of the humiliation they had been forced to bear at the hands of Muslim invaders. This agitation furnished one of the first instances in which Hindus in the US had made themselves heard. From the late 1980s onwards, Indian American Hindus lent emotional, spiritual and material support to Hindu extremists, even bringing out newspaper ads in support of the argument that the Muslim usurpation of Indian history would no longer be tolerated. The Chicago chapter of the VHP would go so far as to release a statement, in the wake of the mosque’s destruction on 6 December 1992, celebrating the ‘thunderous successful culmination’ of attempts to liberate Ayodhya from the yoke of Muslim tyranny and usher in a golden dawn of azaadi (freedom).
Though far removed from India, and fully aware of their own position as an ethnic, cultural and religious minority in the US, Indian American Hindus would also show themselves adept at deploying discourses of multiculturalism to simultaneously stake their rights in a pluralistic America and interrogate the loyalty of Indian Muslims to the Indian nation-state. It is significant that, through the institution of an award for the ‘Hindu of the Year’ in 1994, two years after the wanton destruction of the Babri Masjid brought shame to India and left a long trail of arson, murder, and rioting, the Los Angeles-based Federation of Hindu Associations (FHA) would seek to honour in the first two years these three public figures in India: Bal Thackeray, Sadhvi Rithambhara, and Uma Bharati, whose entire political careers have been built, among other shenanigans, on mocking the circumcised Muslim as a metaphor for the Muslim community that, in constant emulation of the partition, always seeks to further cut up or circumcise India. Thackeray’s goons have mastered the art of bringing terror to the streets, though, in all fairness, it may be added that they are somewhat ecumenical in spreading around their hatred and contempt, targeting not only Muslims but, in recent years, working class immigrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and elsewhere.

The Temple Hinduism of Swaminarayan Gujaratis in the US furnishes perhaps one of the more unusual guides to Hindu fundamentalism. Both students of Hinduism and of recent Hindu political movements might wonder at this choice — the former because the Swaminarayan movement appears to be an entirely legitimate development within the Hindu faith with a large following, and the latter because so much scholarly work has been riveted on the history and organisation of the RSS, VHP, and BJP, on the electoral strategies of the BJP and the Shiv Sena, the terror tactics of the Bajrang Dal and the Shiv Sena, the ideological work performed by the RSS, the worldwide efforts of the VHP at diffusion of ‘Hindu culture’, and so on. However, the September 2002 terrorist attack on Akshardham, a huge temple complex in Gujarat’s capital city of Gandhinagar, which serves as the world headquarters of the Swaminarayan faith, suggests that those who perpetrated the atrocity, which took the lives of twenty-nine people and left three times as many wounded, were extremely careful in choosing their target. In late February 2002, let us recall, many ordinary Hindu residents of Gujarat, apparently inflamed by the news that nearly sixty Hindus had been killed when two coaches of a train were set on fire at the train station in Godhra, carried out a chilling pogrom against their Muslim neighbours in Ahmedabad, Baroda, indeed across large parts of the state. The violence lasted over many days, even stretching out to weeks in some parts of Gujarat, and is estimated to have led to the deaths of over 2,000 Muslims and displaced well over 100,000 people, some of whom, ten years after the killings, continue to languish in relief camps. There is ample evidence that some of the state’s highest functionaries, charged with the maintenance of law and order, did not merely permit the violence to take place under their very noses, but often goaded the arsonists and killers to be more efficient in the execution of their tasks.

When terrorists struck Akshardham six months after the pogrom in Gujarat, they would not have been unaware of the fact that the leaders of the Swaminarayan faith maintained a spectacular even sinister silence during the whole course of the pogrom. We should not be surprised that adherents of the Swaminarayan faith claim that they steer clear of politics and were bound to observe neutrality, and it is entirely germane, to a consideration of this point, that Gujarat’s Chief Minister Narendra Modi, under whose regime the pogrom took place and who was returned to power shortly thereafter with a thumping majority at the polls, has cleverly sought to position Gujarat as the ultimate ‘developmental’ state where Muslims and Hindus alike are benefitting from a clean, efficient government. It is the same clean-shaven look of the Gujarat government, behind which lurks a state machinery that has been assiduously studying and even improving manuals on ethnic cleansing, that have endeared it to overseas Indians and moved them to become among Modi’s most ardent supporters. The Swaminarayan faith, though originating in India, similarly receives the bulk of its sustenance from diasporic Gujaratis in east Africa, Britain, and mainly the United States; moreover, owing to the disproportionate influence of Gujaratis among Indian ethnic and linguistic groups in the US, the adherents of the Swaminarayan faith have come into the position of being able to shape the contours of Hinduism in the US and even the course of politics in the state of Gujarat. Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the current leader of the Bovaswamis Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the organisation through which the faith came to be institutionalised in 1907, has been actively courting overseas Gujaratis since the 1970s.
What is most distinct about the Swaminarayan faith is that its leaders and adherents are determined to usher Hinduism into a new era of monumental architecture and modernist achievement. Nowhere is this more evident than in the BAPS temples which have sprung up not only in Gujarat but even more spectacularly so in the diasporic setting of North America. When the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan temple was inaugurated in Neasden, just outside London, in 1995, it was described as the world’s largest Hindu temple outside India — barring Angkor Wat, which, however, is an archaeological site. The temple website proudly states that ‘2,820 tonnes of Bulgarian limestone and 2,000 tonnes of Italian Carrara marble were shipped to India, carved by over 1,500 craftsmen and reshipped to London. In all, 236,300 carved pieces were assembled like a giant jigsaw puzzle in less than 3 years. It is a miracle of modern times worked by over a thousand volunteers.’ BAPS then broke its own record when, in quick succession, it opened, on each occasion, the world’s largest temple — in Houston (2004), Chicago (2004), Toronto (2007), and Atlanta (2007). The temple in Bartlett, some 40 miles from downtown Chicago, is described on its website as a place of ‘wonder’: ‘This masterpiece of ancient design and workmanship, which was put up in only 16 months, is testimony to the sheer dedication and devotion of over 1,700 volunteers.’ The Atlanta temple’s introduction begins on a more innocuous note: ‘A Mandir is a Hindu place of worship — a haven for spirituality and a place of paramount peace.’ Apparently, to rehearse an old belief, places of worship should reflect the greatness of God; and so, effortlessly, the site goes on to rehearse nearly the same facts about yet another temple: ‘The BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir was inaugurated in August of 2007 after only seventeen months of construction time utilising 1.3 million volunteer hours. The Mandir is comprised of three types of stone (Turkish limestone, Italian marble, and Indian pink sandstone.) More than 34,000 individual pieces were carved by hand in India, shipped to the USA and assembled in Lilburn [Georgia] like a giant 3-D puzzle.’

Nearly all the major BAPS temples in the US have been entered into tourist guidebooks. This has fulfilled one ambition of the Indian American community, namely to render Hinduism more visible. There is an anxiety of influence that pervades adherents of Hinduism in the US, none more so than the affluent Gujaratis who are followers of the Swaminarayan sect. We notice how the sheer enumeration of large numbers marks the description of each achievement; but, as if this were not enough, like many middle class Indians the BAPS members appear to think that certification from the Guinness Book of Records is the ultimate in human achievement. In 2000 alone, the BAPS spiritual leader, Swami Pramukh, received a Guinness certificate for the largest Hindu temple outside India, and another one for performing a world record 355 temple consecration ceremonies between 1971 and 2000. These certificates are proudly displayed in the foyer of the Neasden (London) temple. Hinduism need not be just the ‘oldest’ religion in the world, it must also display some of the energising and self-aggrandising features that many middle-class Hindus otherwise associate with Islam.

_Coda: Bovine Science_

There is much else that is remarkable about the BAPS temples. Though in the diasporic setting Hindus initially made do with makeshift temples, converting an abandoned church or unused storefront into a temple, with growing affluence members of the Hindu community have become more particular that temples should conform to the norms stipulated in the _bhuta-sastras_, ancient temple construction manuals. BAPS temples are, as I have suggested, immensely ornate affairs, but what is extraordinarily striking is how monumental BAPS temples have been transformed into museums of ancient Indian culture and Hinduism. The exhibition, ‘Understanding Hinduism’, unveiled at the opening of the Neasden BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in 1995, is a case in point. The viewer is introduced to the auspicious sound ‘OM’, and more elaborate panels advert to the history and beliefs of Hinduism. The section called ‘Glory’ sets the tone for what is to follow, even if one should believe that the nationalism on display is by no means unusual. As the exhibition catalog states, ‘Hinduism existed before the sun rose on the kingdoms of Egypt or set on the Roman Empire; even before it sparked upon the Chinese civilisation. Well before the Renaissance in Europe, Hindu astronomers were mapping the skies, doctors were performing surgery, and seers were composing scriptures.’

It is understandable, of course, that there may be no room for subtlety or scholarly finesse in an exhibition aimed at the general audience. Many scholars have spoken of Hinduism as an invented tradition, and the fact is that neither the word ‘Hindu’ is encountered in the ancient texts nor did those described as Hindus think of themselves as such. These observations will
appear to ‘observant Hindus’ as unnecessary quibbles or as arguments designed to malign the faith. Whether the Hindus thought of themselves as Vaishnavas, Shaivites, Shakto, or Tantrics, they had — as a section called ‘Hinduism for Society’ announces in grander detail — established a university at Takshashila (Taxila) in 2700 BCE, or were in the know, as the Surya Siddhanta of the astronomer Bhaskaracharya (c.600–680) shows, about the law of gravity 1,200 years before Newton. The Gupta-era astronomer Aryabhata (c.476–550) had similarly argued a thousand years before Copernicus that the earth revolves around the sun. Indian science has, not surprisingly, claimed Aryabhata for itself — India’s first satellite is named after him. The question remains why he or Bhaskaracharya should be on display in a section purporting to show how Hinduism has worked to produce a better society. The more alert viewer at the exhibition would have noticed two further peculiarities. First, the Hindu nationalist still seeks approbation from the West: thus all the quotations — from the Australian Indologist A. L. Basham, the first century CE Greek traveller Apollonius Tyaneaus, Romain Rolland, Mark Twain, and Arnold Toynbee, among others — pointing to the wisdom of the ancient Hindus are from Euro-American sources. Secondly, there is a constant endeavor to suggest that the findings of Hinduism and modern science are compatible: if the modern Hindu had a modicum of knowledge of the historical past and the rich spiritual legacy of the faith, he or she would show some awareness of being uniquely armed with spiritual insight and material well-being alike.

The Bartlett BAPS Mandir, in the western suburbs of Chicago, has a similar permanent exhibition with exactly the same title, ‘Understanding Hinduism’. The museum-in-the-temple is already a nod to Western science and to the supreme importance of the museum modality in modernity; and, yet, it is the eternal persistence of modernity on which the Gallery of Hindu Achievements rides its success. The Guinness Book modality is gloriously on display here, as India is projected as the land of firsts. Whatever the domain of knowledge, the ancient Hindus were there first — they excelled in aviation, in the production of atomic energy, and in aeronautic espionage, anticipating the very scientific developments for which the West takes credit. The law of gravity was first discovered in India, but now the credit is given to ‘Maharshi Kanad, an Indian physicist’ rather than Bhaskaracharya. The viewer is told that the concept of ‘zero’ was introduced to the world by India; and since this claim is undisputed, the viewer may be lulled into believing much else; thus ‘the first history book, the first university, the first Hospital — all [were] founded in India, hundreds of years before any thought of these arose in countries across the world.’ It will not do to argue that some claims are fraudulent, while others are plausible or even clearly established. The more substantive question is what relationship such achievements of Indian science have to Hinduism, and equally why a religion which claims to be the world’s oldest has to validate itself in the language of science.

Hindu science has a lighter side to it, which brings me, in closing, to the subject of cows. These bovine and overwhelmingly benign animals are as good a place as any to commence any number of histories, whether of Hindu communalism, colonial writings on India, Hindu-Muslim riots, cow protection in India, and so on. There are a nearly endless number of communal riot narratives where a fracas between the two ‘communities’ is said to have commenced when a cow’s head was thrown into a temple or a mosque was desecrated by a pig’s head. Colonial writers sought to represent the gap between Hindus and Muslims as unbridgeable: the former burn their dead, the latter bury them; the former have millions of gods and goddesses, the latter believe only in Allah and in Muhammad as his Prophet. But perhaps the more lively way to get across this difference was to suggest that the Muslim loves to eat the cow, while the Hindu loves to worship this animal. One should not be surprised that Gandhi, the great votary of ahimsa (non-violence), was himself a staunch advocate of gau raksha (cow protection), likening the cow to both Mother Earth and the divine figure of the mother. However, though there is little relation of his Hinduism, however that might be characterised (a no easy task considering his declared view that a man may not believe even in God and still call himself a Hindu’), similarly Gandhi would have looked askance at many of the claims made on behalf of the cow.

To consider what Hindutva bovine science has reaped, a small booklet published by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, The Protection of Cow-Clan (2000), furnishes a delightful guide. Drawing on some of the shastric [scriptural] texts, which delineate the benefits to be derived from the consumption and use of the five products (panchagavya) of the cow — milk, curd, ghee, urine, and dung — the RSS’s modern experts, who might claim to be inspired by the spirit of scientific experimentation, improve upon the recommendations of the Hindu seers. ‘Ghee made from cow’s milk saves
environment from atomic radiation', and similarly 'cow dung and urine is best for stomach diseases, heart diseases, kidney ailments and TB.' Since what is called 'Delhi Belly' afflicts a huge number of Indians, and cows are also to be found in marvelous abundance in India, one wonders why the RSS cadres have not subjected more of their fellow Hindus to some of the remedies put on offer. Virgins have most likely been considered desirable in every culture, and the urban folklore about sex with a virgin being a cure for AIDS has had many adherents, but RSS's own experts clearly have unique insights into this delicate matter: thus the urine of virgin cow is the best', and since the cows of foreigners 'lack the properties which our cows do have', it stands to reason that the urine of virgin Hindu cows is without comparison. Given the entrepreneurship for which India is justly known, and the culture of jagar or homegrown innovation on which much of the country seems to run, it may be a puzzle why this potent beverage has not been patented so far. Or could it be that the Indian, who is never very far from a cow in the motherland, has only to go within the earshot of the cow to achieve that bliss for which we all crave: 'Sound of cow's mowing [sic] automatically cures many mental disabilities and diseases.' A hundred million cows mooing together may yet cure India of that disease called Hindu fundamentalism!

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TAKING LIBERTY

Gordon Blaine Steffey

'Recently I took a Muslim friend to study the buffet of print laid into the Liberty University bookstore. The university and its bookstore sit on Liberty Mountain in Lynchburg, Virginia, where an SUV trimmed with stickers reading 'Not I, but Christ' and 'Socialism isn't cool' abridges the local temper. Liberty University is the latest iteration of the institution founded as Liberty Baptist College in 1971 by the late Jerry Lamon Falwell, Sr. Americans remember Falwell as skipper of the Moral Majority, a political action group born in 1979 as a consequence of the political realignment of conservative Christians in the wake of the excesses of the 1960s and the increasingly secularist drift of the Democratic Party since the presidential campaign of George McGovern. Dissolved by Falwell in 1989 and succeeded by the Christian Coalition of America, the inter-denominational Moral Majority lobbied politicians and solicited voters to reverse a regnant acceleration into decadence, hallmarks of which included Roe v.Wade and the broad media assault on 'family values'. The British may recall an incongruously sober philippic on the sexual politics of the BBC programme Teletubbies. Falwell's National Liberty Journal insisted that the purple, purse-toting Teletubby topped with a triangular aerial was the fifth column in a 'subtle' re-education of straight children worldwide. Muslims will recall Falwell less for outing Tinky Winky than for his incendiary twaddle about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, twaddle no more forgivable for being de rigueur among demagogues on the Christian Right in the aftermath of 9/11. This followed Falwell's daft attempt on 9/13 to blame 9/11 on 'the pagans, and


Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America, and What Can Be Done About it was published, in November 2001, by American Council of Trustees and Alumni, established by Lynne Cheney, Saul Bellow, Joe Lieberman and others. See also *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* by David Horowitz (Regnery Publishing, Washington, 2006), where you will find M. Shahid Alam, Hamid Algar, Miriam Cooke, Hamid Dabashi, John Esposito, Yvonne Haddad, Ali Mazrui and Critical Muslim’s Vinay Lal. It’s good to be ‘dangerous’ in the neocon universe!

The quote from Bhikhu C. Parekh is from *A new politics of identity: political principles for an interdependent world* (Palgrave, London, 2008, p99.)

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**CITATIONS**

**Bernard Lewis by Peter Clark**


**Twenty-First-Century Crusaders by Arun Kundani**


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**Hindutva’s Sacred Cows by Vinay Lal**

The quotations from Swami Agnivesh are drawn from his article, ‘Religion: Ready to Kill, but Reluctant to Live’, on www.swamagnivesh.com/rel.htm, and from his book *Religion, Spirituality and Social Action* (2nd ed., Delhi: Hope India Publications, 2003), pp27–29; for his views on Islam and terrorism, see the *Hindu*, 1 June 2008; for Amarnath, see http://www.dailyindia.com/show/441120.php (accessed 1 January 2012); and
for his general outlook, see his book *Hinduism in the New Age* (Delhi: Hope India, 2005).


**Taking Liberty by Gordon-Blaine Steffey**

