Intolerance for “Hindu Tolerance”

Hinduism, Religious Violence in Pre-modern India,
and the Fate of a 'Modern' Discourse

by

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I. The Hindu Conceit

There is a particular conceit, shall we say, that afflicts many of the modern practitioners and some of the scholars of Hinduism, and it will be necessary to enter into a somewhat lengthy exploration of the politics and repercussions of this conceit before we can entertain any thoughts on the subject of religious violence in pre-modern India. It is very often argued by Hindus, and in particular by educated, middle-class Hindus, that of all the world's religions, Hinduism remains supremely tolerant towards other faiths. I by no means wish to suggest that practitioners of Hinduism stand in singular and sinister isolation in advancing this claim and that worshippers of other faiths are wholly innocent in this respect. In the wake of the terrorist attacks upon the World Trade Center, for instance, Islamic scholars assiduously sought to highlight passages from the Quran which militate against the interpretation, which in recent years particularly has gained numerous adherents, that Islam is beholden to aggression.1 But few Hindus doubt, and they have received succor from the writings of even Western scholars, that in comparison especially with the Semitic religions, and most particularly Islam, Hin-

1 The discussion forum in the Boston Review (December 2001/January 2002), carrying an article by Khaled Abo El Fadl, The Place of Tolerance in Islam: On reading the Quran - and misreading it, as well as responses to the piece, may be consulted with some benefit. Khaled Abo El Fadl has offered a lengthier exposition of his ideas in: The Place of Tolerance in Islam. Eds. Joshua Cox, et al. Boston 2002. He has come to be seen in the United States as the rational, moderate face of Islam in the American media, though the conservative ideologue Daniel Pipes has launched a vitriolic attack on El Fadl as a closet bin Laden sympathizer. See his article, Khaled Abo El Fadl, Stealth Islamist, in: Middle East Quarterly. Spring 2004 online at: www.danielpipes.org/article/1841
duism is extraordinarily tolerant. By the late nineteenth century, certainly, it had become an article of faith among Indian nationalists to subscribe to the view that the Hindus were generally a benign and tolerant people, indeed – and I shall take up this argument later – tolerant to grave excess.

Swami Vivekananda, the iconic figure of resurgent Indian nationhood in the twilight years of the nineteenth century, lectured often on the equality of all faiths. “We have no quarrel with any religion in the world,” states Vivekananda, “whether it teaches men to worship Christ, Buddha, or Mohammed, or any other prophet.” At the famous Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where Vivekananda acquired a considerable following, he gave it as his considered opinion that “if anybody dreams of exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to them that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not fight’, ‘Assimilation and not Destruction’, ‘Harmony and Peace and not Dissension’” ([CWSV] 1:24).

However, from the mere assertion of the equality of religions, which is scarcely the same thing as saying that all religions teach the same thing, Vivekananda was to move in time to a more forceful expression of the sentiment that Hinduism was distinct in embodying a fulsome notion of tolerance. Describing India as “the glorious land of religious toleration”, Vivekananda went on to elaborate: “Our religion is truer than any other religion because it never conquered, because it never shed blood, because its mouth always shed on all words of blessing words of love and sympathy. It is here and here alone that the ideal of toleration was preached.” ([CWSV] III:186 ff.) In India alone, Vivekananda observed, are temples and churches built for those very religions whose adherents came to India with the object of “condemning our own religion” (“The Mission of the Vedanta”, in [CWSV] III:187). Deep in the belly of these utterances is to be found, as some will doubtless argue, the intolerance behind the claim of tolerance, and it comes as little surprise that Vivekananda could simultaneously embrace, with no evident difficulty, the

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view that the Vedas were supreme among all of the world’s scriptures. “You may even believe the most peculiar ideas about the Godhead, but if you deny the authority of the Vedas, you are a natsika [an atheist, unbeliever]. […] So far as the Bible and the scriptures of other nations agree with the Vedas, they are perfectly good, but when they do not agree, they are no more to be accepted. So with the Koran” (CWSV III:333).

Vivekananda was only among the earliest advocates of the view that tolerance is as integral to the spirit of the Hindu faith as the belief in the revelatory status of the Quran is indubitably to Islam. A long line of distinguished Hindu thinkers and scholars of Hinduism, emulated in turn by the more recent advocates of Hindu militancy, have since trumpeted the ecumenism of the faith. The little book on Indian Religions by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an Advaitist or non-dualist who ascended to the Presidency of India, thus earning him the sobriquet of philosopher-king, is introduced by the publisher with the remark that “India is the one ancient country which has taken tolerance as the first pre-requisite of the religious quest.” The book is peppered with observations by Radhakrishnan about the extraordinary plurality of Indian religious life, and the terrain of Hinduism is implicitly represented as hospitably permissive, generously allowing all religions, including the faiths of Judaism and Zoroastrianism, persecuted in other lands, to flourish in India. “Without the employment of force or eagerness for exploitation,” Radhakrishnan wrote, “Hinduism has been able to civilize a large part of Asia. What has attracted it is not imperialist expansion, but the cultural conquest, the peaceful penetration of the thought and mind of the peoples which it achieves by its own spirituality.”

Radhakrishnan’s Edwardian prose adds a peculiar color to the pathos-filled account of Hindu tolerance, as this passage more than amply testifies: “The influence of India is not because her religion is old or her empires are great, not because she developed weapons of destruction or exercised force on a large scale, but because she had an intelligent understanding of the deeper unity in the midst of all diversity. Wherever she went, the deep and silent influence of her vision of the unity of all things in God pervaded. […] All religions she welcomed, since she realized from the cloudy heights of contemplation that the spiritual landscape at the hilltop is the same, though the pathways from the valley are different.”

To continue in this vein would be to belabor what should now be obvious, namely the profound attachment of many Hindu thinkers to the idea that toleration is a distinct and deeply admirable characteristic of Hinduism.

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4 Ibid. p. 98.
Even contemporary scholars, by no means all of them Hindus, more attuned to the politics of such claims have been unable to disavow this mode of thinking. Thus Julius Lipner, in his nuanced and dense study of Hinduism, admits that though most Hindu thinkers have been less pluralistic than one commonly imagines, “a genuine doctrinal tolerance, namely, a tolerance based on the view that one can learn from others and that one’s religious stance is worth struggling for and adhering to but not killing for, is noticeable throughout traditional religious Hinduism.”\(^5\) Writing of the Jews of Cochin, who arrived in India at least a thousand years ago and perhaps much before that, Nathan Katz observes that they “creatively interacted with the tolerant host culture in their social, commercial, and religious lives.”\(^6\) Katz, building on the work of earlier scholars such as M.G.S. Narayanan,\(^7\) recognizes that a number of factors conspired to make the southwest coast of India a hospitable place to foreigners. Yet he is unambiguous in describing the good fortune of Jews in India, who were never subjected to discrimination, as a consequence of Hinduism’s “well known […] tolerance of other faiths.”\(^8\) Katz is quite categorical in his assertion of the view that Jews never experienced any anti-Semitism in India, and that the only intolerance they ever encountered was at the hands of the Portuguese, who shortly after their arrival in India in 1498 established an Office of the Inquisition in Goa.\(^9\)

It behooves us, then, to inquire about the grounds on which Hindu thinkers have thought their faith to be particularly tolerant. While I cannot delve into this at very great length, some of the considerations in scholarly and lay accounts alike of Hinduism are of pertinence; it is necessary to add, as well, the caveat that a considerable body of contentious literature has piled up around these questions, particularly since the advent of militant Hinduism in the last two decades. To take one example: the social scientist and prominent advocate of the rights of low-caste Hindus, Gail Omvedt, recognizes what I have described as the conceit characterizing contemporary Hindu sentiments, and is certain that this conceit must be contested if religious plurality is to survive in India. A defense of ‘secularism’, she has written, “has to begin with a critique of the ideas that religion and society were uniquely intertwined in India, and that Hinduism was uniquely tolerant.”\(^10\) Meera Nand’s recent study of Indian “postmodernists” and their advocacy of “rea-
tionary modernity” takes partly as its charge the unraveling of claims of Hinduism’s “tolerance which aggrandizes itself even as it claims to respect others.” But neither Omvedt nor Nanda have much to say about the circumstances under which this notion of “Hindu tolerance” arose, though Nanda at least is partly attentive to the discursive politics of the notion of tolerance in Indian society.

Hinduism, as we are all aware, is commonly represented as a faith that lacks a text which is supremely authoritative for all believers, just as it lacks a historical world figure analogous to Christ, Mohammed, or Moses. Nor is Benares, whatever its elevated place in the Hindu cosmos, to Hinduism what Mecca is to Islam. Sites that are critical to Shaivite Hinduism, such as Benares, may be much less important to Vaishnavas. Hinduism is polyphonic, polycentric, riddled with deities, and we have to recall that magical incantation, popularized by colonial texts, of 330 million Hindu gods and goddesses. The presumption is that anything so wildly diffused and anarchic a faith as Hinduism must perforce be more tolerant: it is impossible to insist on the centrality of a single text, mode of worship, deity, or a messiah, and similarly Hinduism’s capacity to absorb dissenting, disjunctive, and conflictual practices and modes of beliefs into its fold obviates the compulsion towards intolerance. A famous passage from the Rig Veda, which compares the flow of the waters of various rivers into the ocean with the infinite variety of forms of worship all pointing to the Supreme Being, is commonly cited as an exemplary instance of Hinduism’s pluralism, and Hindu texts are admitted rich in this respect. But one could do little better than to accept the testimony of the Abbé Dubois, a French clergyman who visited India in the late eighteenth century and left behind a voluminous account of Hindus customs and manners. “In some parts”, he wrote of South India, “a remarkable peculiarity is to be observed in reference to these two sects. Sometimes the husband is a Vishnnavite and bears the namam on his forehead, while the wife is a follower of Siva and wears the lingam. The former eats meat, but the latter may not touch it. This diversity of religious opinion, however, in no way destroys the peace of the household. Each observes the practices of his or her own particular creed, and worships his or her god in the way that seems best, without interference from the other.”

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11 MERRA NANDA, Prophets Facing Backward, Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India. New Brunswick etc. 2003 p. 61.

12 J. A. DUBOIS, Hindu Manners. Customs and Ceremonies. Ed. and trans. Henry K. BEAU- CHAMP. Oxford 1939 p. 119. If Dubois’s account seems to express something of a bewilderment about Hinduism’s plurality more particular to the eighteenth or even early nineteenth century, when the European understanding of Hinduism was still extraordinarily rudimentary, consider
found, resonated with a remarkable toleration for difference at various levels of social organization. Though the evidence from sectarian texts, for instance Book X of the Bhagavata Purana, which holds a unique place in the literature of Krishna bhakti, suggests a sharp contrast to the ecumenism of the Upanishads and the more philosophical strands of Hindu thinking, it is precisely for this reason that such texts – unlike, for example, the Vedas and the Upanishads – are viewed as sectarian.

Alongside its polycentrism and pluralism, Hinduism is also said to be almost uniquely indifferent towards proselytization. For any study of religious violence in India, this consideration must weigh very heavily, since forcible religious conversions are often viewed as one of the most likely sources of such violence. Indeed, militant Hindu discourses of recent years resonate not only with loud denunciations of the forcible conversions alleged to have been carried out by Muslim kings over several hundred years when much of India was under their rule, but also with critiques of the contemporary work of Christian missionaries who are described as winning converts to Christianity among the lower castes with false promises of material rewards. Thus, from the Hindutva standpoint, considering Hinduism’s disinclination towards conversion, it stands to reason that Hindus have historically been the objects, but almost never the subjects, of religious violence.

For the present, though, let me stay with the subject of Hinduism and proselytization. It is generally held to be the case that, for a complex number of reasons, one can only be born into the Hindu faith, and this tenet of belief is subscribed to even among those in the West who have turned to some aspect of the faith. Moreover, where a faith does not insist on its singularity, and

the following assessment from a few years ago about Hinduism as a religion of “multiform nature and inner contradictoriness”: “Even within Hinduism, one person’s sacred scripture is by no means necessarily someone else’s. This individual may assign a minor role to a god whom another individual worships with deep devotion as the supreme divinity and Lord of the world. One man teaches that living creatures should never be harmed, while another man’s altar drips with the blood of sacrificed goats and buffaloes. One believer’s Tantric practices are an abomination to others. Even the doctrine of reincarnation, which we think of as being so closely linked with Hinduism, is not a universally accepted part of Hindu teaching and faith.” See Heinrich von Stietencron, What is Hinduism? On the History of a Religions Tradition, in: Christianity and the World Religions. Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Eds. Hans Küng et al. New York 1986 p. 138–139.

13 I mention this only incidentally, but a notable and little-known instance is the followers of the Hare Krishna movement, who are generally viewed as Hindus, though they themselves have gone to court in an effort to ensure that they are not absorbed into the fold of Hinduism. The founder of the Hare Krishna movement, Swami Prabhupada, has always been clear on its Vaishnava (rather than “Hindu”) origins, and in 1977 he wrote: “There is a misconception that the Krishna consciousness movement represents the Hindu religion. Sometimes Indians [and not
is prepared to countenance the idea that worship of its own gods is not the only path to emancipation, conversion holds no brief for its advocates. To commentators such as Radhakrishnan, everything in the history and practice of Hinduism militates against the idea of conversion, and the spiritual elegance of Hinduism lies in its ability to attract adherents without compelling them to undergo conversion. "Though there was no missionary motive, no attempt to convert others to the Hindu faith," Radhakrishnan has written, "its influence extended to other regions like Java, Bali, where we still have a Hindu colony, and other parts of the East. [...] Hindu religion was not what we call a proselytizing religion, though in its great days it had no objection to foreigners accepting the Hindu faith."\(^1\) Hinduism’s civilizing mission, many Hindus themselves believe, was a form of "cultural conquest" rather than an expression of "imperialist expansion", and it is best described as "the peaceful penetration of the thought and mind of the peoples which it achieves by its own spirituality."\(^2\)

That phrase, "where we still have a Hindu colony," appears to have come so effortlessly to Radhakrishnan that one might well interpret it as a sign of his easy reconciliation to the idea of an Hindu empire, an empire that, he would insist, was never founded on force. One might also be tempted to put down Radhakrishnan’s account of the expansion of Hinduism to his tendency to view the Indian past as an unfolding of the triumph of Advaita, and the assimilation, largely free of bloodshed and violence, of ‘lower’ peoples and elements into the ‘higher’ civilization of the Aryans. But even someone such as Gandhi, who refused himself the comfort of various formulations to which many others are habituated, was convinced that “there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism.”\(^3\) Gandhi similarly declared himself as uninterested in principle to the idea of conversion, but not for the reasons advanced by the contemporary Hindu right; nor did he prevent conversions from taking place. He did not, for instance, attribute conversions to a Christian conspiracy of malicious intent, and he fully recognized that the lower castes, from which the preponderant majority of India’s converts derive, sought — as they thought — a more dignified form of living under the umbrella of a different faith, whether Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. But Gand-

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1. Radhakrishnan, Religious (cf. n. 2) p. 27.
2. Ibid. p. 97.
hi was firmly of the view that conversions arose from the convert’s inadequate conception of his or her own faith. Gandhi’s copious observations on Hinduism point, however, to a more ecumenical conception of the possible relationship between toleration and the lack of conversion in the emergence of the Hindu worldview. I quote from a well-known passage: “So, we can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu; or we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu, or a Christian should become a Mussalman; nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted; but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship.”\(^7\) The lack of proselytism might well have been the bedrock of Hindu tolerance; but the fulfillment of Hindu tolerance, Gandhi seems to suggest, resides in its conception that each faith has enough diversity in its own fold to attract the most diverse of followers. The shallowness of a faith is but the reflection of the shallowness of its followers.

There remains to put into place one final aspect of the narrative of Hindu tolerance with which most middle-class Hindus at least are in wide agreement. This is the argument, generally expressed in tones of anger conjoined with anguish, that the tolerance of Hindus has made them spectacularly vulnerable. European writers, unmindful of their own extreme intolerance towards Indians, took upon themselves the task of persuading Hindus that their disposition towards non-violence and tolerance made them easy prey for Muslims. This is certainly one, infrequently explored, genealogy of the idea that Hindu tolerance has, historically speaking, invited aggression. The purported meekness of the Hindu made him open to attack from aggressive Muslims and devious Europeans, and – on this narrative – the Hindu scarcely understood that the values of tolerance to which he subscribed were not shared by the wider world. The Hindus knew nothing of the ways of the world, and everywhere they were trampled upon, their broken, mutilated, and destroyed temples were the visible reminder of their ignorance of evil and their susceptibility to the self-aggrandizing designs of monotheistic faiths. In fact, the contemporary resurgence of militant Hinduism owes everything to the idea that Hindus will no longer allow themselves to be subjugated. As Ashok Singhal, the general-secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization which has spearheaded the Hindu revivalist movement, wrote a few years ago, “The message has reached far and wide throughout the world that the Hindu will no more be subdued. Eventually the world at large will come to the conclusion that after all now they have to

deal with a Hindu India.” So Hindu tolerance, in which the VHP professes to take great pride, as witnessed by the laudatory accounts it publishes of the ecumenical features of Hinduism, comes down to this: Muslims and Christians in India must be put on notice, as indeed they have been, that Hindus will no longer tolerate the intolerance of other faiths, and that true tolerance resides in the intolerance of intolerance. Another stalwart of the VHP, Harish Bhai Bhatt, advertising to the pogrom against Muslims in the state of Gujarat in early 2002 that took the lives of over 2,000 Muslims, put it this way: “Now, it is the end of tolerance. If the Muslims do not learn, it will be very harmful for them.” Where the rest of the world was inclined to view the large-scale violence as an unambiguous expression of deep intolerance, some commentators, mindful that it could “legitimately” have spread far beyond Gujarat, invited speculation on those qualities which impelled the Hindu to exercise restraint: “It is because of Hindu tolerance that the conflagration in Gujarat did not extend to the rest of India.”

Hindutva websites are awash with proclamations of renewed Hindu pride, and throughout the 1990s, VHP rallies were held to the accompaniment of the slogan, ‘Garva se kau ki hum Hindu hain’, or ‘Say with Pride that we are Hindus’. The intent of these websites is to convey the message, with scarcely a hint of subtlety, that the tolerance of the Hindus has been their graveyard. In all this, the presence of Swami Vivekananda once again appears to loom large. His frequent visits to the West made him wary of Christianity, and the complaint that missionaries make “improper representation of the Hindu gods and goddesses” is encountered frequently in his writings (CWSV IV:415). More to the point, Vivekananda berated Hindus for their inability to defend their faith, and speaking of his work in the West, he once wrote to a friend: “I am the one man who dared defend his country, and I have given them such ideas as they never expected from a Hindu” (CWSV V:81). Yet we should be cautious in turning Vivekananda into the forefather of Hindu militancy, or in supposing that “Hindu tolerance” is a category that Hindus, in a remarkable demonstration of what Edward Said described as second-order Orientalism, have inherited exclusively from colonial texts which were obviously embedded in a different politics of power. Once, on a visit to Kashmir, Vivekananda felt pained at seeing the ruins of temples and the idols of Hindu deities scattered around the country. Approaching the goddess Kali with anger and trepidation, Vivekananda bowed before her and

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18 As cited on this website: www.hindunet.org/vivekananda/as_interview
asked in an anguished tone, “Mother, why did you permit this desecration?” Vivekananda reports that Kali whispered to him, “What is it to you, Vivekananda, if the invader breaks my images? [Why do you trouble yourself over it?] Do you protect me, or do I protect you?”

II. The Left-Secular Critique of “Hindu Tolerance”

If the advocates of Hindutva have sought to empty public discourse of the idea of Hindu tolerance, it is a striking fact that the left secular intelligentsia has displayed a similarly virulent opposition to the idea that Hinduism has a special disposition towards tolerance. The secular critique takes several forms, and generally begins with the observation that in recent years, a regime of oppression has been unleashed upon Christians and Muslims. In early 2002, a pogrom against Muslims in the state of Gujarat, from where Gandhi hailed, took the lives of over 2,000 Muslims, and though militant Hindus have described the killings as a spontaneous outburst of rage at the torching of a train that left nearly 60 Hindus dead, all the evidence points to a program of violence encouraged and even orchestrated by the state and its minions. The left, secular critique has the apparent advantage, then, of arguing from the present, from the brute evidence before one’s eyes, but whether this might not be a liability in unraveling the past remains to be seen. Communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims has been a marked feature of the Indian landscape for quite some years, but the desecration of


22 The documentation on the Gujarat killings is massive, and much of it is easily accessible on the web. See, for example, The Human Rights Watch Report, “We Have No Orders to Save You”. State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat. April 2002 online at: www.hrw.org/reports/2002/india. Some critics, almost entirely drawn from the left, doubt even that the Hindus burnt alive in the two train coaches were killed by Muslims from Godhra and its vicinity, and they cite the Government of Gujarat’s own forensic report to suggest that the fire which devoured some 60 people may have been instigated from within the train. Rakesh Sharma’s brilliant film on the Gujarat killings, The Final Solution (2003), suggests that the Hindus killed on the train in Godhra were martyred before the event. Their pictures were taken and framed before the torching of the train, knowingly turned into icons of ritual worship. If, so goes the argument, Hitler and his fellow Nazis themselves set the fire to the Reichstag, why should we think of Hindutva extremists as incapable of killing fellow Hindus to set the stage for mass-scale violence against Muslims? One suspects that this question will never be easily resolved, but it appears to me unnecessary to resort to conspiracy theories. Nothing that transpired on the train can, in any case, justify the pogrom perpetrated against the Muslims, nor should anyone be prepared to furnish supposedly extenuating circumstances.
churches, the murder of missionaries, and the intimidation of Christians, all noticed in the last few years, has severely tarnished the reputation of Hindu militants and the governments which furnish them with patronage. Hindu-Muslim conflict can sometimes be ascribed to competition for scarce economic resources, and Muslims provoke Hindu anxieties about the rapid expansion of Islam, or – to use a phrase that more accurately renders middle-class Hindu sensibilities – the further partition of India and the creation of yet another Pakistan, but no such pretense can explain the surge of violence against Christians. Quite to the contrary, as a percentage of the population, the Christian community has stagnated, perhaps even slightly diminished in the 50-odd years since independence. And if indifference, and principled opposition, to conversion – the exceptions I will note later – appear to reside at the center of the narrative of Hindu tolerance, then the violence perpetrated against Christian missionaries and aid workers, who are represented by Hindu militants as active proponents of a hostile faith, seems to point towards the emergence of an alarming intolerance towards conversions.

It is often suggested that the advocates of Hindu militancy should not be confused for average Hindus, and that the excesses of Hindutva ideology should resolutely be distinguished from the tenets of Hinduism. This proposition would appear to have wide legitimacy, as indeed it should. However, a certain stand of the secular critique of Hindu militancy rejects the attempted distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism, and it does so not merely because the secularists lack the language to speak of religious faith, but because the narrative of Hindu tolerance appears to them as intrinsically objectionable. (The secularists also argue that people who hold firmly to their religious faith might well be prepared to kill for it, and they reject as spurious the claim that those who do kill for their faith are, in fact, betraying their faith rather than acting as its representatives. But I am not aware that these same secularists are also prepared to concede that people are perfectly willing to kill in the name of science, the purported opposite of religion. Though countless examples come to mind, military planners and munitions engineers, who are eager to test their new toys, such as the obscenely named ‘Daisy Cutters’ or ‘cluster bombs’, on often defenceless populations should be viewed as cold-blooded killers and fundamentalists of another sort.) Secularists are inclined, quite predictably, to view the institution of caste as an inextricable part of the Hindu faith, and they find it beyond comprehension that anyone could view caste as anything but the expression of extreme intolerance and inequitarianism.

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23 See, for example, NANDA, Prophets (cf. n. 11) p. 57–64.
this disclaimer by Radhakrishnan: “The institutions of caste illustrate the spirit of comprehensive synthesis characteristic of the Hindu mind with its faith in the collaboration of races and the cooperation of cultures. Paradoxical as it may seem, the system of caste is the outcome of tolerance and trust.” If virulent caste oppression is intrinsic to Hinduism, then what is the need for the intolerance that characterizes Hindutva? However, the secular critique of Hindu tolerance rests largely on a number of other arguments, and I propose to take up each of these briefly, before moving to a brief consideration of the empirical evidence for relations between different religious communities in the medieval and early modern period of Indian history.

First, secular commentary emphatically repudiates what the historian Sumit Sarkar has described as the “very effective semantic ploy through which it has come to be widely assumed that Hinduism is near-unique among religious traditions in being non-proselytizing”. Putting into question the common-sense view that one can become a Hindu by birth alone, Sarkar adds that “certain ticklish questions arise as soon as we enlarge the time-perspective: where did all the Buddhists of ancient India go, for instance? And how did Hindu icons and myths spill over into large parts of South-East Asia?” These questions might be ticklish indeed, and one presumes that Sarkar will bring his critical faculties to bear on these questions; but alas he is not even energized to further exploration, since no more mention is made, either of Buddhist decline in India or of the expansion of Hinduism into Southeast Asia. Sarkar, for all his critique of the “semantic ploy” said to have been exercised by Hindus, is scarcely innocent: just as the assertion of the disappearance of Buddhism is intended to stir the reader into thinking that Hindus might have had something unsavory to do with it, the suggestion of Hindu aggressiveness is raised by the juxtaposition of the appearance of Hinduism in southeast Asia. Somewhere Buddhists disappear; elsewhere Hindus appear. But do these facts bear any necessary relationship to each other?

Sarkar moves quickly to the next set of questions, and argues that anodyne terms such as ‘Sanskritization’ and ‘cultural integration’ disguise the fact of the long history of Hinduism’s successful attempts at the conversion of lower castes, its aboriginal people, and competitors from other faiths.25
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One begins to suspect that "conversion" is nearly everything that Sarkar wishes to make of it, an impression confirmed by his subsequent rhetorical move, which is to remind the reader that from the late nineteenth-century onwards, as tribal people themselves became more organized and Hinduism found more assertive spokespeople, a new set of terms – among others, shuddhi, meaning purification, and paravartan, turning back – was introduced to bring ex-Hindus back into the fold. The backdrop of colonialism against which these movements of reconversion should be assessed is ignored, as though attempts at the muscularization of Hinduism took place in a vacuum. We should, moreover, recall that earlier in the same paragraph Sarkar had professed to enlarge the time-perspective, though by now placing the late nineteenth-century in apposition to remote antiquity, to the period of the Hindu "colonization" of Southeast Asia,\textsuperscript{26} time-compression is deployed to convey the erroneous impression that an uninterrupted history of Hinduism as a religion bound to the apparatus of conversion can be written effortlessly. "Semantic aggression can hardly go further",\textsuperscript{27} Sarkar writes of the Hindutva propagandists, but he could have scarcely furnished a more accurate assessment of his own rhetorical strategies.

Sarkar is openly joined in the expression of his sentiments by many other avowedly secular commentators, but I should like to advert at some length to only one recent study, Achin Vanaik's \textit{The Faiths of Indian Communalism}.

\textsuperscript{26} It is necessary to recall, as well, that Southeast Asia received not only Hinduism from India, but also Buddhism and Islam, though one wouldn't know this from Sarkar's account. Is it "Hinduism" alone that stood in a "colonizing" relation to Southeast Asia? There is a lively debate among scholars who have studied India's relations with Southeast Asia about the circumstances under which "Indian influence" spread throughout Southeast Asia, and conversion plays, in fact, a very small part in these discussions. Two recent overviews of the debates are found in I. W. Marrett, The "Indianization" of Southeast Asia. Reflections on the Historical Sources, in: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 8, no. 2. 1997 p.143-161, and Hermann Kulke, Indian Colonies, Indianization or Cultural Convergence? Reflections on the changing image of India's role in South-East Asia, in: Onderzoek in Zuidoost-Azie. Agenda's Voor de Jaren Neergang. Ed. H. Schulte Nordholt. Leiden 1990 p.8-32.

“Much has been made of Hinduism's refusal to convert”, Vanaik avers in a sub-section revealingly entitled “The Mystique of Hindu Tolerance”, “yet Brahminism and many a ‘Hindu sect’ have engaged in conversion.” This seems so self-evident a truth that Vanaik at once moves on to a second proposition, namely that “the existence of the caste system and untouchability” give the lie to assumptions about “the natural tolerance of Hinduism”, and from thence to a third proposition: “There is no way [...] that Hinduism could have spread to Southeast Asia to become as influential as it did for centuries without such conversion.” Yet, in a work where the notes account for a fourth of a 350-page text, not a single citation is allowed to illuminate the oracular text; moreover, considering that the book is a paean to the virtues of reason and evidentiary logic, Vanaik’s approach can scarcely be condoned. The expression, “there is no way”, is calculated to close the matter rather than invite the reader to engage in conversation. Taken together, Sarkar and Vanaik find it inexplicable that “Hindu icons and myths” could have spread to Southeast Asia without some process of conversion at work, but I suspect that the cultural icons of American capitalism, from Tee-shirts bearing the logo of the Los Angeles Lakers and Coca Cola to Microsoft and the Harvard Business School, should also be seen as agents of conversion – as indeed they might be. Nearly the entire world has been converted to the twin ideologies of the free market and consumption. Consequently, the authors should then be prepared to offer a far more complex phenomenology of conversion – conversion to consumer goods, to the American dream, to risk and entrepreneurship, to notions of what is alleged to be individualism – than what is put on offer.

Secondly, if the claim of Hindu tolerance is made, from the secular standpoint, in bad faith, nowhere is this better illustrated, they argue, than in the willful obfuscation of the long history of Hinduism’s persecution of Buddhism, and Jainism to a lesser extent, and even of the history of sectarian conflict within Hinduism. The Jaina suffered much at the hands of the Vira-savas in South India, and colonial ethnographers stated that impaling and mutilation were “intended to commemorate the savage treatment, which the Jaina of old received at the hands of their Saiva persecutors.”

28 Vanaik, Furies (cf. n. 24) p. 147.  
29 Ibid.  
Hindutvavadis cried themselves hoarse over the alleged Hindu foundations of the Babri Masjid, eventually destroyed by Hindu militants on 6 December 1992, they overlooked the fact that some Saiva temples are known to have been built with the remains of Buddhist stupas as well as Jaina temples. Buddhist lore records the venomous deeds of Pusyamitra, the Sunga King (187–151 BC), who is remembered as a “cruel persecutor of Buddhism.” The Saivite ruler of Bengal, Sasanka, is said to have cut down the bodhi tree at Gaya, under which Gautama is traditionally described as having gained enlightenment on his way to becoming the Buddha, in the early part of the 7th century, and around a century later the Hindu king of Ujjain is described by Buddhist chroniclers as having waged a war of extermination against Buddhists.

If anyone should allege that Buddhist records are tainted in this respect, and that the Buddhist chroniclers were politically motivated in representing Buddhists as victims of Hindu outrages, the evidence of the Hindu Puranas would perhaps appear to be even more remarkable. Kunal Chakrabarti’s recent study of the Bengal Puranas seems to show how far Hindus were prepared to go to demonize Buddhists. We have to recall that Buddhism was based on a careful rejection of the central tenets of Brahminism – that is, the infallibility of the Vedas, the social and ritual superiority of the Brahmmins, and the sanctity of *sarnashrama dharma*. Now in Bengal, as Chakrabarti argues, Buddhism was well-entrenched and highly institutionalized, and posed a threat to the supremacy of Brahminism. Buddhists, consequently, are set up as the deviant Other, as ungrateful wretches, harbingers of sin, and as inauspicious as vile animals. The *Devibhagavata Purana*, which is dated to the 11th–12th centuries, represents the Buddhists as evil Brahmmins who strayed from the path prescribed in the Vedas, failing to perform “the daily rituals, sacrifices and penances”, so utterly fallen that they would “sell away their parents, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, as well as the Vedas, the tirthas, and dharma.”

The burden of Chakrabarti’s remarks is to argue that the narrative of Hindu tolerance is largely a fiction, and the disappearance of Buddhism from India is assumed to be conclusive proof of Hindu intolerance. To Chakrabarti’s credit, his account is more riddled by ambivalence than I have perhaps conveyed, and he recognizes that Buddhism’s disappearance from Bengal, and more generally India, cannot be writ large only as a tale of Hindu oppression or of violent Hindu-Buddhist religious conflict. He avers that

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“Brahmanism has always grown through continuous accretion, and its ever-expanding fluid margin was not conducive to a sharp demarcation of the boundary between ‘them’ and ‘us’—except ‘in opposition to Buddhism’, which provided the ‘external and deviant other’ to Brahminism and its quest for ‘unambiguous self-identity’.33 But the history of Buddhist-Hindu relations is immensely complicated by the fact that though both Buddhism and Jainism arose as “heterodox” religions around the same time, resistant to the sacerdotalism, ritualism, and caste hierarchies of Brahminism, Buddhism eventually disappeared while Jainism flourished.34 The fact that Jainism remained confined, for the most part, to western India, and seldom reached the status of a state religion, suggests that its adherents were never viewed as a threat to Hinduism and, consequently, faced comparatively little persecution.35

Nonetheless, the contrast between Buddhism and Jainism points to a more credible account of Buddhism’s evisceration from the land of its birth. The Jains were more sensitive to the demands of the laity, and produced a litera-

33 Ibid. p. 147-148.
34 I have drawn upon the insights of Padmanabh S. Jaini, The Disappearance of Buddhism and the Survival of Jainism: A Study in Contrast, in: Studies in History of Buddhism. Ed. A. K. Narain. Delhi 1982. The caveat suggested by S. K. Sharma in keeping in mind the relations between Hindus and Jains is of some pertinence: “The fact that Jainism continued to flourish even long after the ‘alleged persecutions’ [by the Hindus] cannot be considered as proof of the falsity of the allegations any more than we can say that there was no persecution of Christianity in Europe, or of Hinduism under the Muhammadan Rulers, since these religions have survived to our own days and continue to flourish if at all with greater vigour.” See S. K. Sharma, Jainism and Karnataka Culture. Dharwar 1940 p. 172. I should add, as well, that I use the term ‘heterodox’ very provisionally, and likewise for its opposite, ‘orthodox’. These are categories derived from the history of religion in the West, and there can be no mechanical transference of such categories of interpretation.
35 A similar argument could, of course, be advanced about Judaism in India. Though their numbers have dwindled since emigration to Israel commenced after 1948, Jews in India never numbered more than 30,000. Consequently, those inclined to view the notion of Hindu tolerance as a fanciful myth might well argue that Hindus had nothing to fear from Jews and that tolerating them earned Hindus easy moral capital. Such arguments, apart from being predicated on the view that human behavior can ordinarily if not always be best understood as a form of cost-calculation, are insensitive to the very histories that they purport to summon. The Sassoon family, Baghdadi Jews who came to dominate the commercial life of Bombay before making an empire for themselves that stretched to Hong Kong, London, Kobe, Amsterdam, New York, could plausibly have been viewed with envy and hatred by Indians who could not rival the Sassoon family. If, to take another example, numbers were the prime determinant, then a miniscule number of Indians on the northwest coast of the United States around 1900 should not have provoked such loathing and anger among white people as to be subjected to grievous insults, racial epithets, and even physical assault. See Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans. Berkeley 1998.
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ture which helped to give coherence to the idea of a Jain community; similarly, they were more closely bound together by ties of kinship, profession, and trade. Buddhist monasteries are widely described as having become hotbeds of corruption, and the disrepute into which the religion fell cost it some adherents. But much more significant than all this is Chakrabarti’s admission that “brahmanical deities eventually began to penetrate the inner circle of the Buddhist pantheon”; on the other hand, the Buddha himself was transformed into one of Vishnu’s avatars or incarnations. “Buddhism had come so close to Puranic brahmanism”, Chakrabarti concludes, “that an effective distinction between the two was virtually lost in the eyes of the lay devotees.”

Buddhism, it then appears, lost its very reason for being; it could no longer successfully mark its separate existence. The hostility of Brahmanical Hinduism notwithstanding, Buddhism imploded rather than suffering a demise at the hands of violently opposed practitioners of Hinduism.

III. Epigraphic Fundamentalism and the Political Deployment of Texts

The critique of the idea of “Hindu tolerance” by secular historians has yet another aspect, often entailing a curious kind of secular sectarianism, one which becomes transparent when we juxtapose Kunal Chakrabarti’s treatment of the Puranas with Richard Eaton’s work, which has received the unstinting support of many secular historians, on the supposed desecration of Hindu temples in the period of Muslim rule. It is Eaton’s submission that the commonly believed accounts of the destruction of thousands of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers and their vassals are vastly overblown. Since Muslim chroniclers, however, were themselves prone to describe the destruction of Hindu temples in gory detail, and seem to furnish evidence of the wholesale destruction of Hindu temples and idols, Eaton must perform read these chronicles against the grain. As he attempts to show, the evidence of these chronicles cannot generally be reconciled with the epigraphic record; moreover, for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the fact that a Muslim ruler’s vigorous destruction of the idolatrous temples was supposed to earn him merit, Eaton views these texts as suffused with immense rhetorical excess. Supposing that Eaton’s interpretation is plausible, and I am inclined to believe it is, the question we have to ask is why the Puranas, which least of

36 Chakrabarti, Process (cf. n. 32) p. 141-145.
all lend themselves to literalist readings, have not similarly been subjected to
a more hermeneutic and nuanced reading. *The Devi Purana*, which was writ-
ten sometime before 850 AD, describes a Brahmin at first devoted to Vishnu
who, over time, turns towards Buddhism - a transformation epitomized by
his changed thoughts, which turn to the acquisition of material wealth and
the pleasures of the company of women:

"Kingdom leads to acquisition of wealth. Enjoy your kingdom, your wife and other
women. There is no harm in consuming meat and wine or indulging in copulation, if
you feel so inclined. If a man enjoys one hundred women, he acquires a fortune; if he
enjoys a thousand women, he is considered blessed; if he enjoys ten thousand wo-
men, he achieves equivalence with Kamadeva; and if he enjoys ten million women, he
achieves salvation."38

What is the politics entailed in the reading of the Puranas, and why is it that
Eaton’s *epigraphic fundamentalism* is normative for the reading of a class of
highly esoteric texts such as the Puranas? It would not be in the least surpris-
ing if, from the standpoint of the Hindutva ideologues, the tendency of the
secular Hindu intellectual to bend over backwards to establish Hinduism’s
intolerance was not conceived as a subtle testimony to the tolerance and ecu-
menism of Hinduism.

Before unraveling, then, the further implications and the troubled politics
of the secularist critique of representations of the Indian past as marked by a
Hindu predisposition towards religious tolerance, we may find it prudent to
consider the evidence furnished by some other texts in establishing how far
the template of religious violence can be used to understand relations be-
tween Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in pre-modern India. The *Rajatar-
angini*, a chronicle of Kashmir dated to 1148-49 AD, has become especially
prominent in the debates on the writing of history carried out in India since
the 1960's, more so because it is often viewed as the lone history to have eman-
ated from India before the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. One of the
*Rajatarangini*’s earliest translators into English, M.A. Stein, was prolific
in his assessment of its unusual qualities, and he introduced it with the observa-
tion that it was attracting the attention of European scholars owing to the
"exceptional interest" which attached to it “as practically the sole extant pro-
duct of Sanskrit literature possessing the character of a true Chronicle”.
Noting that the India of Hindus was often said to be possessed of no history,
Stein found that the "interest of Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* for Indian history
generally lies in the fact that it represents a class of Sanskrit composition
which comes nearest in character to the Chronicles of Medieval Europe and

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of the Muhammadan East." Writing in the flush of independence, the nationalist historian, R. C. Majumdar, while of the opinion that "advanced ideas of historiography were not altogether unknown in ancient Indian literature", was nonetheless constrained to admit that the absence of historical writings constituted "the weakest point in ancient Indian literature", and he went on to confess that Kalhana is "the only historian that ancient India can boast of".

But if the Rajatarangini has been enlisted in the dispute over whether there ever was any such thing as "historical thinking" and a historical literature in pre-modern India, it has also been drawn into debates over conceptions of the Indian past as 'syncretic' and 'communalist', debates which, considering the disputed status of Kashmir that has led to military hostilities between India and Pakistan since 1947, resonate in the present with political urgency. The Rajatarangini is an extraordinary source on the manner in which Buddhism, Islam, Saivism, and Sufism entered into symbolic and cultural exchanges in Kashmir and informed its history down to the present day, though the recent Wahhabite and fundamentalist incursions into Kashmir by the Taliban and an array of militant Islamic groups are aimed precisely at sketching Kashmir's history in the monotones of a rigid Islam. One scholar of the contemporary history of Kashmir has argued that the Kashmiri Brahmins (or Pandits, as they are generally known) whose exodus from the Valley is as acute a problem as any that has afflicted Kashmir, "present newly revived accounts of centuries of religious, linguistic and political persecution by Muslim rulers and quote from the Rajatarangini [...] They claim that the original Sharda script of the Kashmiri language was destroyed when the language was forcibly Persianised." True, one can read in Kalhana's account

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39 Kalhana, Rajatarangini. Vol. 1. Trans. M. A. Stein. Westminster 1926 Preface p. vii-viii and Introduction p. 4. I have discussed the singularity of the Rajatarangini in: Vinay Lal, The History of History. Politics and Scholarship in Modern India. New Delhi 2003 Chapter 1, as well as in: Vinay Lal, An Indian "History"? Reflections on Kalhana's Rajatarangini. Conference on "Clio in the Colony: Questioning History from Modern India" in honor of Romila Thapar. University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. October 22-23. Two complete translations of the Rajatarangini into English have been consulted. The older one by M. A. Stein, dated to 1902, is available in a reprint edition of two volumes (as cited above); the more recent translation is of R. S. Pandit, Kalhana's Rajatarangini. The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir. New Delhi 1968 [1935]. References will be to the number of the book (Taranga) and the verse. Citations are from Stein's edition, but where Pandit's translation has been used, a "P" follows the citation.

40 R. C. Majumdar, Historiography in Modern India. Bombay 1970 p. 5. Majumdar does not state what he meant by "advanced ideas of historiography", but a reasonable inference can be drawn from his thoroughgoing commitment to Rankean style positivism.

of the destruction of the (Hindu) Sahi kingdom at the hands of Hammira, who has correctly been identified as Mahmud of Ghazni, a lamentation on the extinction of a dynasty whose greatness Kalhana saw as nearly impeccable (VII:45-70), but nonetheless the Rajatarangini does not lend itself easily to such enterprises. Scarcely anything in the text reeks of communalist sentiments, and Kalhana's marvelously jaundiced view of Brahmans, whose knavery, cunning, and deceit could not escape his piercing gaze, should be enough to disabuse anyone of the notion that Kalhana was partial to his fellow Hindus.

It is Kalhana's lengthy treatment of the reign of Harsa, who occupied the throne from AD 1089 to 1101, which serves profitably as the locus classicus for contemporary debates on communalist or religious conflict in pre-modern India. The 900 verses lavished on Harsa (VII:829-1732) sketch the gradual decline of a king who Kalhana first described as "born from atoms of light", so effusive was the light of his royal bearing, but who died deserted by his servants, shorn of his family, mourned not even by a single woman from his seraglio, and "then burned naked liked a pauper by a certain wood-dealer named Gauraka." (VII:842, 1727, 1730) "This story of Harsa is, indeed," Kalhana writes, "long and somewhat astonishing like a kind of Ramayana or Bharata" (VII:1728), and he suggests that poor judgment, an inability to distinguish between men who were loyal to him and those who could easily be bribed into abandoning his service, indecisiveness, cruelty towards his own family, and sheer hubris sent Harsa on the road to perdition and death. So far gone was Harsa's command over his faculties that even as a Hindu he could not desist from the spoliation of the Bhimakesava temple with its Vishnu image (VI:178), and indeed so rich was the loot he acquired from this "deserted shrine" that it set him to thinking that the wealthy temples in the area would yield untold treasures. His aggressively expansionist campaigns, meanwhile, were exerting tremendous pecuniary pressure upon Harsa, and he proceeded to act upon his resolve to plunder all the temples that lay in his path. Not content with the treasures of these temples, Harsa had images of gods carted off, and he appointed an officer charged with responsibility for "overthrow of divine images" (VII:1082-1091). Kalhana spares no words to describe Harsa's iconoclasm: "In order to defile the

42 "The kings whom fate ruins," writes Kalhana, "clear their kingdom from rivals by killing their relatives who would preserve it, [with the result] that some one else] enjoys it alone"; and he follows this up with the observation that Harsa, "whose mind was perverted by the most sinful perfidies against his relatives, came then to be exploited by rogues [to such an extent] as would be incredible even of simpletons." (VII:1075, 1072) There are numerous other passages in this vein.
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statues of gods”, he says of Harsa, the king “had excrements and urine poured over their faces by naked mendicants whose noses, feet and hands had rotted away”; offering of flowers were replaced with spittings (VII:1092-1094).

Harsa’s institutionalization of the pillage of temples by appointment of an officer – devopotpananayaka, a man who uprooted the gods – charged with the supervision of such activities suggests, as Romila Thapar has often argued, that we should move decisively against those readings of Indian history which serve no purpose but to insist on the bloody course of Islam’s spread throughout India and which are fixated, in particular, on the allegedly widespread destruction of Hindu temples. Almost nothing is calculated to excite the minds of those Hindus already inclined to agree with the bald proposition put forth recently by an American preacher, namely that “Muhammad was a terrorist”, as much as gory tales of the pillage and arson of countless number of Hindu temples. Numerous minds have been trained on what we might call the “temple question”, and as I have already suggested, Richard Eaton’s meticulous (though by no means novel) work on the desecration of Hindu temples establishes that recent narratives of Hindutva history, fattened on the supposition that a theology of iconoclasm and a pernicious hatred of the Hindu guided Muslim rulers, cannot in the least be substantiated. Building, in effect, upon a simple but generally compelling idea advanced by Thapar, Eaton proposes that the limited temple destruction that did take place was fuelled not by an implacable hatred of others, but rather by a politics of conquest particular to those times. Writing before Thapar, K. A. Nizami came to much the same conclusion, and was categorical in stating that the “Turkish invasions were not inspired by any religious zeal or proselytizing fervour. Shihab-u’d-din’s first conflict on the Indian soil took place not with a Hindu raja but with a Muslim co-religionist and he faced him with the same determination and in the same spirit in which he carried his arms into the Aryavarta.” While admitting that “religious terminology” was “inevitable in the medieval context”, Nizami finds little to characterize the Turkish wars as “religious in context”, and argues that “the
dec-
struction of temples and cities” were “the necessary concomitant of medieval
warfare.”47 Temples that stood, for example, in the war path of a king were
destroyed, as were temples with dynastic authority, and both Nizami and
Eaton recount examples of Hindu kings looting Hindu temples that were
supremely iconic of a competing power’s authority. “One west Chalukyan in-
scription”, Nizami writes, “formally accuses the Chola kings of having burnt
Jain temples in the Belvola province”, and the “Vaisnavas of the South level
similar charges against the Cholas.”48 Not surprisingly, Eaton also takes
recourse to the evidence from the Rajatarangini.
A closer reading of the Rajatarangini, however, makes one wonder
whether the text can be summoned so easily in defense of the quid pro quo
variant of the secularist sensibility. It has become almost de rigueur to sup-
pose that if Hindu temples were destroyed by Muslim invaders and rulers,
Hindu rulers did likewise in plundering Jain temples and Buddhist stupas.
While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Kunal Chakrabarti’s
aforementioned study of the Bengal Puranas is dedicated to documenting
the unremitting “brahmanical hostility towards Buddhism”,49 it is no coinci-
dence that the ascendancy of the Hindu right has been paralleled by the rise
of a secular scholarship committed to the documentation and enumeration
of Hindu atrocities perpetrated upon Jains and Buddhists.50 I find it signif-
icient, to adduce only one example, that one of the most forthright responses
to the agitation leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6 Decem-
ber 1992, emanating from a group of scholars and activists constituted as
members of the Sampradayika Virodhi Andolan [Movement Against Com-
munalism], should have dwelled on the fact that destruction of places of
worship “was not done exclusively by Muslim rulers.” The authors further
state, “There are instances of Hindu rulers destroying temples in order to
loot their wealth, such as Harshadeva of Kashmir (11C.), who defiled and
looted temples and even had a special officer whose function was to seize
the icons and wealth of temples. […] The Jagannath temple in Puri is built on
the ruins of a tribal shrine, and in Bodhgaya a Buddhist vihara was de-
stroyed by Sasanka in the 6th C. to build a Hindu temple which still ex-
ists.”51

47 KHALIQ AHMAD NIZAMI, Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thir-
48 Ibid. p.88.
49 CHAKRABARTI, Process (cf. n.32) p. 150.
50 The Paramara ruler, Subhatavarman, is invariably mentioned for his plunder of Jaina tem-

els in Gujarat.
If the intent of this form of argument should be to suggest, in the words of the Andolan, that “regimes of many communities established political power over local populations by destroying places of worship”, and that adherents of no one religion or ethnic group exercise a monopoly over evil, then one can only express agreement with this form of political awareness. Yet, when this politics of conquest is described as expressive of the “barbaric” mentality of ancient and medieval rulers, standing in apparent defiance of “all modern, democratic, and civilised institutions of our society”, the unqualified approbation of modernity begins to look troubling. The matter of whether historians have given sufficient thought to the philosophical and ethical implications of establishing equivalences of evil apart, the question remains whether the Rajatarangini offers unequivocal evidence of the barbaric conduct of Harsa as a Hindu ruler. Kalhana says of Harsa that he spared only the Ranaavamin and Martanda temples, as well as two colossal statues of Buddha [most likely the Bamiyan Buddhas, destroyed in 2000 AD by the Taliban]; otherwise, and I quote, “There was not one temple in a village, town or in the City which was not despoiled by that Turuska, King Harsa.” (VII:1095)

“That Turuska, King Harsa”: the phrase insistently and compellingly demands speculation, but its immediate force is to controvert the interpretation that the passage, shorn of the all-important qualifier, “Turuska”, has generally been forced to bear. Kalhana may have meant to convey the impression that Harsa had converted to Islam, which might perhaps explain his willingness to desecrate Hindu and Buddhist temples, but the text scarcely supports this interpretation. Nowhere does Kalhana advert to Harsa’s conversion, and it is altogether unlikely that so important an event in Harsa’s life would have escaped his attention. Indeed, further elaboration of Harsa’s character suggests that Harsa had not converted to Islam: “this perversely-minded king”, Kalhana states, “ate domesticated pigs until his death.” Or is it that Harsa’s consumption of pork, contrary to the injunctions of Islam, made him perversely-minded? Did his perversity reside in the fact that while having converted to Islam, he treated its prohibitions with contempt? Everything in the text inescapably points, rather, to the most likely reading: so barbarous was Harsa’s conduct that he had effectively transformed himself into a Turuska, a marauding Muslim. His plunder of temples and desecration of images was more in keeping with the conduct of Muslim invaders; he acted as though he were a Muslim; and yet, since Kalhana desists from deploying the terms that would customarily have been used to designate Muslims, such as Muhammadan or yatana, one can reasonably infer that he used the term “Turuska” with utmost deliberation to signify a racial rather than religious category. By “Turuska”, Kalhana may have meant no more than a foreigner, a foreigner of Central Asian origin – but then he could scarcely have been a
Hindu. The Turkish invasions introduced, one senses, a sea change in the politics of Kashmir, a new threshold of pillage and violence to which the country was not accustomed. Kalhana hints further at the association of Harsa’s Turuska-like conduct with moral depravity: thus the description of his consumption of pork follows an account of his incestuous relationship with his “father’s wives, who had brought him up on their arms,” his “carnal intercourse” with his own sisters, and his monetary support of “Turuska captains” (VII:1147-1149). Whichever interpretation one turns to, none without difficulty can be reconciled with the view of Harsa, prominently on display in left-secular histories and commentaries, as a Hindu king who devastated Hindu and Buddhist temples.

IV. The Politics of the Conceit and Its Critique

The history of communal conflict in India since the nineteenth century, the advocacy by certain members of both the Muslim intelligentsia and orthodox Hindu intellectuals of the two-nation theory which led to India’s vivisection and the creation of a Muslim-majority state, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in South Asia (including Afghanistan) since the 1980s, and the rise of the Hindu right over the last decade point to the reasons why the Indian past is a disputed interpretive terrain. One might well contend that the past, and not only the Indian past, is always “disputed”; but perhaps far more, the political life of the nation as well as the integrity of intellectual communities, is at stake in these debates raging in India. I have so far suggested that, embedded in the Hinduva and secular critiques alike of the idea of “Hindu tolerance”, the particular contours of the history of religious conflict in India, or rather what are taken to be signs and evidence of such conflict, begin to take shape, and in my concluding remarks I will move towards a more expansive critical commentary on historical scholarship on India and its categories of interpretation. It is significant, for instance, that the historians of the Subaltern School, who have uniquely succeeded in placing Indian history within broader debates on historiography, have resolutely kept their distance from pre-modern India, and that the vast bulk of their labors were, until very recently, confined to dissections of colonialist and nationalist histories. It is their contention, of course, that the pre-colonial past was so heavily mediated by the colonial period that the entire edifice of elitist histories, of whatever variety, has to be taken apart before one can begin to unravel pre-modern India. One consequence of their failure to subject the pre-modern to rigorous critical scrutiny is that the subaltern historians have been
largely bypassed in such debates as the one that took place over the Babri Masjid, or those that, in the wake of altered history textbooks, have arisen over such figures as Prithviraj Chauhan and Shivaji.

As I have sought to establish, the secular critique of the idea of Hindu tolerance is grounded in a radically different understanding of Hinduism’s disposition towards conversion, its historical relationship with Buddhism, and the implications of caste hierarchy for any discourse of tolerance. Though few secularists will dare to disown Gandhi, he is viewed as someone who never repudiated the hierarchies of caste society, and indeed even embodied them in his bodily practices and public actions.52 Indeed, the religious pluralism of Gandhi, and of Hindus more broadly, is construed by scholars such as Peter van der Veer as a way of both retaining caste hierarchies and, with more or less subtle effect, proclaiming the superiority of Hinduism over other religions. The heterogeneity and plurality of varnashrama dharma never had room for “Untouchables, Muslims (yavanas) and Christians (mlechchhas)”, van der Veer suggests, and he offers “hierarchical relativism” as a substitute for “tolerance” to describe social relations in India. Even the “well-known Hindu idea that there are many paths leading to God, as well as that there are many gods” became, he argues, a platform for suggesting that those outside the system were free to exercise their choice of religious worship so long as they conceded the hierarchies of varnashrama dharma.53 As André Beteille has put it, with evidently less animus, “The religious pluralism – or, if one prefers, the religious tolerance – of the past was rooted in a hierarchical social order in which some communities, together with their beliefs and practices, were regarded as unquestionably superior to others.”54

By implication, at least, Beteille’s “religious tolerance” stands in contradistinction to what another scholar has described as “humanist tolerance”.55

52 I use the formulation “bodily practices and public action” rather than “private and public” for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that Gandhi’s body was on public display. Even his enemies, as such, were not private. See the discussion in Vinay Lal, Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi. Essays on Indian History and Culture. Calcutta 2003 Ch. 5; a slightly earlier version of which is available as: Vinay Lal, Nakedness, Non-violence, and Brahmacharya. Gandhi’s Experiments in Celibate Sexuality, in: Journal of the History of Sexuality 9 nos. 1-2, 2000 p. 105-136.


54 André Beteille, Secularism re-examined, in: Hindu. 3 September 2001 p. 10.

Vinay Lal

What is allegedly particular to the idea of religious tolerance as it has characteristically been encountered among Hindus is that, precisely on account of the toleration of hierarchy, caste society remains inclusive. "The absolute basis of the ever-present dharma", writes Richard Burghart, "implies some notion of identity among all members of Brahma's sacrificial body; the relative basis implies some notion of difference."\(^{36}\) The conduct of a person may not be in congruence with his or her dharma as a Brahmin, but it may be perfectly opposite conduct for a sudra; and if it is ritual separation of the castes that preserves the whole, it is well to remember also that the place that each caste retains in the system is gained at the price of hierarchy and the oppressiveness that indubitably falls upon the lower ranks of the caste system. That "tolerance" need not preclude hierarchies was, however, conceded by Radhakrishnan himself, though he had in mind not so much the hierarchies of caste as the degree of abstraction of one's conception of the divine. "The worshippers of the Absolute are the highest in rank," he observed; "second to them are the worshippers of the personal God, then come the worshippers of incarnations like Rama, Krishna, Buddha; below them are those who worship ancestors, sages, and deities, and lowest of all are the worshippers of petty forces and spirits."\(^{37}\) As an Advaitist, Radhakrishnan was likely to reach this conclusion; but he would also have recognized that bhaktas, for example, do not take this view, and are apt to regard themselves as having a more privileged relationship with the divine than other classes of believers. Hierarchies are not only not set in stone, but different hierarchies might prevail simultaneously.

The secularist position, then, receives its greatest intellectual sustenance from the thought that tolerance is an eminently modern construct, an inheritance—much like everything else that is good and beautiful in life—from the Enlightenment. "Hindu tolerance" is thus an impossibility, indeed an oxymoron. In the crude formulations that one has come to expect from the writings of the apologist for British colonialism, Robert Frykenberg, intolerance in Indian society witnessed a sharp increase in the early decades of the twentieth century as nationalism, spearheaded by Hindu demagogues such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (the forerunner of modern-day "Hindu fundamentalism") and Gandhi, the arch exponent of an anti-Enlightenment and extra-constitutional politics, gained ascendancy and provided sustenance to all those fissiparous tendencies that the British had so valiantly struggled to stem over the

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\(^{36}\) Ibid. p. 284.

course of their rule.\textsuperscript{38} The notion of Hindu tolerance, argues Achin Vanaik in a book that reflects the consensus view of the left secular intelligentsia, could only derive from “the period of the Encounter between East and West and to its aftermath of reform Hinduism and neo-Hinduism.” But Vanaik is not content to characterize Hindu tolerance as merely a “modern construction”: it is an element of a larger attempt at indigenous universalism which dares to “compete with and oppose Enlightenment universalism itself.”\textsuperscript{39} From Vanaik’s standpoint, “It is only after the rise of individualism and individual rights that the terms ‘pluralism’ and ‘tolerance’ obtain a strong positive connotation. This comes about specifically in modernity.”\textsuperscript{40}

Vanaik thus unfortunately clusters together three discrete analytical strands: the relationship of tolerance to the idea of the individual; the differentiation, already encountered in the writings of Max Weber, between negative or passive and positive tolerance; and the distinction between tolerance and pluralism. He might, to make his argument more productive, have thought of making a distinction between toleration and tolerance: as the former points to an attitude, the latter characterizes a certain practice. He might then have considered the distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, so crucial to an understanding of Hinduism, and from there have derived the argument that Hinduism’s texts might well evoke an immensely catholic outlook towards the others, but that the litmus test in Hinduism, namely conformity to regimes of practice and ritual, perhaps show the limitations of textualist approaches. But since Vanaik is scarcely versed in the exegetical and hermeneutic traditions of Hinduism, he is unable to countenance such a move; and had he done so, he would then have had to contend with arguments of the like furnished by Chakrabarti, whose readings of the Bengal Puranas, as we have seen, evoke texts that are intolerant in the extreme but bear no necessary evidence of oppressive Hindu conduct towards Buddhists.

Vanaik’s only recourse, rather, is to take it as a given that the individual as an atomistic being is a distinct creation of the modern West. Thus Vanaik stands wholly implicated in the colonial sociology of knowledge, which postulated Indian society as an aggregate of collectivities, defined almost exclusively by caste and religion. The individual, on this account, never existed in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[39] Vanaik, Furies (cf. n.24) p.164. On the modernity of the idea of tolerance, see also van der Veer, Politics (cf. n.53) p.293–297.
\item[40] Vanaik, Furies (cf. n.24)p.113.
\end{footnotes}
India, unless it be the Oriental Despot. Weber differentiated negative tolerance, which arises from the indifference that the fabled renouncer of Indian society has to all pursuits in life, from the “absolute relativizing of all ethical and soteriological commandments” required by positive tolerance.\footnote{Max Weber, Religion of India. The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism. Trans. Hans Geith/Don Martindale. Illinois 1958 p. 189-190.} For his conception of negative tolerance, which he frequently confounds with pluralism, Vanaik draws succor from the writings of Sudipta Kaviraj and others. “Coexistence of local communities which would have liked to impose their ways on others had they the power to do it”, Kaviraj has written, “is not equal to a situation of pluralism-tolerance. It is a pluralism which represents a powerless intolerance.”\footnote{Cited in Vanaik, Furies (cf. n. 24) p. 115.} An “ideological tolerance of a positive kind” was absolutely foreign to Hinduism, and the ineffective intolerance of Hinduism “led to peevishness and irritation more than mass violence.” Apparently, to follow Kaviraj, there is a continuum between the macro structures of Hindu society, riddled by noxious caste oppression and Brahminical hierarchies, and the inner psychology of the Hindu way of life, known largely for its “peevishness and irritation.” The Hindu is weak even unto his tolerance; he embraces tolerance not as a knowing, moral agent, but merely from circumstance and instinct. The Hindu’s tolerance is at best a form of toleration, a grudging acceptance of certain unavoidable contingencies. Ever the lazy native, the Hindu allows “peevishness and irritation” to substitute for violence, which does, after all, necessitate the expenditure of energy. The tolerance of the Hindu is also akin to the non-violence of a Gandhi: if necessity is the mother of invention, the Hindu can make a virtue out of weakness.

To follow the arguments of Vanaik (and Kaviraj) yet further, it is evident that passive or negative tolerance is to positive tolerance what pre-modern tolerance is to modern tolerance. If tolerance is a specific attribute of modernity and Enlightenment thought, then pre-modern tolerance must itself be explained with reference to some other category. Before the advent of modernity, religions in India co-existed with each other, but this form of “lived tolerance” required “neither mass understanding nor mass curiosity across faiths.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 161.} I am not aware of any “mass curiosity” exercised by practitioners of one faith towards practitioners of another faith, unless the mass gatherings of the followers of Billy Graham and countless television evangelists are secretly dedicated to the study of Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, or Buddhism. It beggars the imagination to suppose that Christians have displayed “mass curiosity” or “mass understanding” towards any of these faiths.
Intolerance for "Hindu Tolerance"

If at all there are exceptions, one would have to point to the Indo-Islamic world and to the extraordinarily fecund ways in which Islam was brought into engagement with Hinduism.

An old canard has resurfaced in Vanaik's writings, and though we cannot be unduly detained by it, let us at least take note of it: intellectual curiosity has been one of the distinguishing traits which marks the superiority of Western civilizations over the rest of the world, and it explains, in substantial measure, the ascendency of the West since European navigators set out to explore and chart the globe. In Vanaik's language, the mere coexistence of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others is best described as a form of pluralism. "What most distinguished pre-modern India from other parts of the world was not tolerance but the scale of its religious pluralism," observes Vanaik, "where such pluralism has never meant much more than religious coexistence."64 Consider how remarkably similar his assessment is to the analysis proffered by a nineteenth-century colonial administrator, whose view at least allows a more charitable reading: "Seldom in the history of mankind has the spectacle been witnessed of two civilizations, so vast and so strongly developed, yet so radically dissimilar, as the Muhammadan and the Hindu, meeting and mingling together."65 Vanaik represents the mere existence of various religions side by side as akin to the pluralism of plant life, since pluralism in this instance can scarcely be viewed as a form of tolerance. Within an ecosystem not all plants fare equally well; some even die – but let that pass. That organic analogy has its own history: in all this, there is more than a faint scent of that phrase made memorable by Marx when he described Indian society as instinctual, as "vegetating in the teeth of time."66

In thinking about the subject of tolerance, and especially religious tolerance, in the modern political life of India today, and the idioms in which historians write about the place of religious conflict and violence in pre-modern India, I am agitated by a very fundamental concern about the narrowing of intellectual discourses. This diminishment of a space for dissenting frameworks, I have argued, has not merely taken place in the manner usually thought of by the left, secular intelligentsia, which justifiably is inclined to view Indian public spaces as having been seriously contaminated by the homogenizing forces affiliated with the Hindu right. There can be no disagreement that Hindutva interpretations of the past generally make a mock-

64 Ibid. p.146.
ery of historical evidence and are intolerant of even the most rudimentary canons of historical and social science research. The corrosive effect of Hindutva historians on the public sphere is also, in my view, beyond dispute. Nonetheless, in certain respects, the secular critique of fundamentalism also inhabits the very space of fundamentalism - for instance, in secularists' and fundamentalists' mutual indifference towards, and contempt for, religious faith, and likewise in their mutual attraction towards the discourse of history, the preeminent sign of the modern.

To put the matter succinctly, the secular account of the history of the fated Babri Masjid that was demolished by Hindu militants and their supporters in December 1992 is doubtless superior to the histories generated by Hindutva historians, but we should not overlook the fact that they were mutually agreed that the terrain of history is where the matter should be resolved. The fact that secular and communalist historians alike should have been unable to think about the debacle at Ayodhya in any language other than that of history points to a calamitous failure of the imagination. Though the secular historians do not have the daring of an intellectual gadfly such as the late Nrirad Chaudhuri, who boldly declared that Gandhi had seduced the world into thinking that ahimsa or non-violence was India's special contribution to the moral and spiritual history of the world, whereas in fact India's past was unusually blood-ridden, everything points to their endorsement of his position. One can understand the intellectual difficulties of left, secular historians in embracing views that puts them at the risk of sounding as though they were still serving colonial masters. But this equivocation, it is worth considering, puts their views in considerable alignment with views held by the Hindu right, with this obvious difference: whereas Hindutva narratives are riveted on what are assumed to be Muslim orgies of violence, the left, secular historians view all narratives of "Hindu tolerance" as constructs of anti-modernists such as Gandhi, nationalists and Vedantists such as Radhakrishnan, and Hindu spiritual chauvinists such as Vivekananda.

It is a specific feature of the Indian intellectual landscape that Hindu militants and the militant secularists have, between them, whether through deeds or words, attempted to bleed the idea of Hindu tolerance to death. The Hindutva bigot, while not theoretically indisposed to the idea of Hindu tolerance, since he is mindful of how it is a form of cultural capital which earns India (for instance, through the figure of Gandhi) some attention, recognition, and following, is nonetheless persuaded that it encourages the Muslims

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67 For a more extended discussion, see Lal, History (cf. n. 39) ch. 3.
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—and perhaps other minorities—to pounce upon Hindus; the militant secularist, on the other hand, while clearly and naturally predisposed towards the idea of tolerance in the abstract, is persuaded that the idea of Hindu tolerance is deployed to browbeat Muslims and other beleaguered minorities into submission. The discourse of Hindu tolerance, secularists will argue, produces violence; that alone is sufficient reason to put it into cold storage. The Hindutva bigot locates Hindu tolerance in the scriptures; the secular historian and intellectual finds it theorized in Locke, Montaigne, Voltaire, and the texts of the Enlightenment. The secular intellectuals of the Indian academy search rigorously for the disjunctions between Indian texts and the cultural and religious practices of the people; but, barring some exceptions, they have not asked similarly searching questions about the relationship of Enlightenment texts to the regnant ideas of the times which came to do the handiwork of imperialism. I think it is no exaggeration to suggest that the secular critique of Hindu tolerance shelters behind the argument that where a tradition lacks explicit theorization of religious toleration, the practice must likewise lag behind. Since no Hindu ever authored a political document akin to Locke’s “A Letter Concerning Toleration” (1689), perforce the idea of tolerance must be viewed as entirely foreign to the Hindu mind. Indeed, had Hindus only had a Locke, they might have been a fulfilled people. Or, if I may put this in another language, to the mind of the secular Indian intellectual, pre-modern or Hindu tolerance is something like ethnoscientific. It isn’t quite the real thing; only the West has real science. The secularist is just as adamantly opposed to pluralist conceptions of toleration as he is to pluralist conceptions of science. Moreover, pseudo-tolerance is the secularist’s riposte to the frequent charges of pseudo-secularism emanating from Hindutva’s spokespersons and their sympathizers.

The secular and Hindutva discourses of Hindu tolerance are further united, then, in their indifference to the tolerance of everyday life, indeed to the ordinariness of tolerance. Their shared history of intellectual dissimulation in the manner of the instrumental uses they make of Gandhi points to this, and I shall turn to this in my concluding paragraphs; but let me for the moment turn once again to Vanaik’s book, which shows more clearly than anything else that to recover the idea of religious tolerance, and in particular an ecumenical conception of Hindu tolerance, we shall first have to steer clear of formal models of social science discourse. It is remarkable that Vanaik writes on this question as though it were preeminently a cognitive problem, as though the warp and woof of Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Buddhist relations in India could be divined by reading Durkheim, Weber, and Gellner. Many scholars and lay people alike who have trained their sights on this question generally turn to that long span of time in Indian history, extending
from the ninth century to the late sixteenth century, when a devotional movement, having first arisen in the Dravidian South, eventually came to encompass nearly the entirety of India. Its practitioners disavowed the authority of the Vedas, the hierarchy of caste, the rituals of Hinduism and Islam alike, the sanctity of *varnashrama dharma*, the use of Sanskrit, and so on. However, it is possible to argue that the advent of *bhakti* [devotion] itself points to a groundswell of intolerance in Indian society, and consequently one might wish to forswear any reference to *bhakti* as an illustration of tolerance in Hindu-Muslim relations. The *bhakti* movement, which may also have played a substantial part in eroding the attraction that Buddhism had for dissenting Hindus, is important in this respect as well—though, here again, the relative paucity of historical evidence and scholarship does not permit us to draw any firm conclusions.

But Vanaik could have turned to a large range of other ethnographic material had he sought to ground his understanding of tolerance in the crevices of Indian society. He could have begun by asking why the vast majority of communal riots in India in the years since independence have taken place in the more urban areas, among sectors that have had greater access to education and a much deeper investment in the secularizing processes associated with modernity. He could have been attentive to the history, for example, of the Meos of Delhi, Alwar, and Rajputana, who while being Muslims have for generations derived their names from the Mahabharatic clans, and continue to celebrate, despite recent attempts by both Muslim and Hindu militants to freeze cultural boundaries, Hindu festivals.\(^68\) Or he could have sought to engage in an altogether different exercise of historical cartography and psychogeography, such as that furnished by Ashis Nandy in his recent study of the alternative cosmopolitanism of Cochin.\(^69\) A city of a million and a quarter people, Cochin has a substantial population of Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, and had at one time sizable populations of Yemeni Arabs, Jews, Chinese, Syrians, and others. Cochin has also been free of religious violence for at least 500 years, but as Nandy is quick to point out, this should not be construed to mean that "there is no hostility among communities. Nor does it mean that communities do not have their distinctive written and unwritten memories of past injustice and violence against them.\(^70\)

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\(^{68}\) *Shail Mayaram, Resisting Regimes. Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity.* Delhi 1997.


\(^{70}\) Ibid. p. 158.
As Nandy and his associates found during fieldwork, the Hindus retained certain prejudices about Muslims; the Muslims, likewise, harbored prejudices about the other community; indeed, each community expected the other community to have prejudices about itself, and both Hindus and Muslims declared that they would be disappointed to find out that the other community did not have certain prejudices about its other. Their tolerance is such that it allows for the recognition, to a point, of intolerance. Hindus and Muslims both retain, privately and publicly, memories of some oppression by the other community. Yet the singular fact remains that Cochin has been singularly free of communal rioting. To read Nandy on Cochin is, then, to come to an awareness that tolerance is meaningful only when it is viewed dialogically and dialectically, with a full recognition of the intolerance amidst which it acquires a life of its own. I am not aware of any account of Hindu tolerance which entirely wishes away intolerance, though secularist representations of Hindu intolerance are, to the contrary, totalizing. To take one example: many victims of the violence accompanying the partition of India in 1947–48 have admitted that even in the midst of that conflagration, they were inclined to view the members of the other community as tolerant. They recognized the intolerance as a form of temporary regression into a state of madness, and granted the perpetrators the dignity of their madness.\(^\text{71}\)

I implied earlier that Gandhi has been the nemesis of both the Hindutva-vadis and the secularists, but only in part for the same reasons. The anti-modernist and non-modernist thrust of Gandhi's writings is singularly unattractive to both of them. I am, however, only concerned, at this moment, with Gandhi as an embodiment of Hindu tolerance, indeed religious tolerance in the Indian context in its broadest sense, and more particularly with the Hindutva and secularist view of Gandhi as a figure of tolerance. What I have called the intellectual dishonesty of the Hindu bigots, with respect to their feelings for Gandhi, is too transparent to even require commentary. One has to recall only the speech of Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin, at his trial, and his firm conviction that Gandhi's tolerant outlook towards Muslims had emasculated India, leading not only to its vivisection but its ostracism from the community of real nation-states which Godse thought of as hard-nosed, masculine entities.\(^\text{72}\) The Hindu right, as Sumit Sarkar among

\(^{71}\) See the discussion in Ashis Nandy, _An Ambiguous Journey to the City, The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination_. Delhi 2002, p. 98–139. Intimations of this view are also to be found in the oral histories interpreted by Urvashi Butalia, _The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India_. New Delhi 1998.

\(^{72}\) Nathuram Godse, _May It Please Your Honor_. Delhi 1977.
many others has documented, has also deliberately distorted Gandhi's views on conversion, and attempted to turn him into an implacable foe of conversion. However, the secularists, and in particular Indian Marxists, have likewise not acquitted themselves well. After having shouted themselves hoarse for decades over how Gandhi was a Hindu to boot – he spoke too often of "Ram Rajya", it was alleged, and even declared himself a sanatani, that is an orthodox Hindu – the Indian Marxists seemed to have suddenly realized, following the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, that the militant defenders of Hinduism were perhaps more justly to be placed in the category of orthodox Hindus. Gandhi suddenly appeared, for example in publications of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), as the supreme figure of Indian ecumenism, even the modular example of the 'good Hindu'. If the Hindu has his 'good Muslim', the secularist has his 'good Hindu'.

It has become a matter of habit among Indian secularist intellectuals that when the political situation calls for it, Gandhi is resuscitated and trumpeted as an example of Hindu and Indian religious tolerance; but many of these same people have never been able to disguise their political, aesthetic, and social dislike of Gandhi's backwardness, his Hinduness, his emphatic repudiation of violence, and his purportedly romantic and indigenist readings of the Indian past. Gandhi derived his secularism or religious ecumenism from his Hinduism, and insofar as he had any ideas of what Vanaik calls "modern tolerance", these subsisted in the premodern practices of Hindu tolerance. There is no other way of reconciling his observation that "a man may not believe in God and still call himself a Hindu" with his declaration that he wished to be considered a sanatani, an orthodox Hindu who – in Gandhi's not entirely distinct rendering of the term – could also simultaneously be a Sikh, Christian, even a Muslim. Yet the conviction persists that, owing to Gandhi, India never had a true revolution of the Bolshevik or French variety, and consequently can never be admitted into the hall of modernity. I suppose, following Nandy's intuition that Cochín will be viewed as having made its way into modernity when it witnesses a full-scale communal riot, that the quest for religious violence in pre-modern India will succeed as India's claims to being modern increasingly acquire force, plausibility, and recognition.

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