

China's Role in India's Hindu Nationalist Discourse

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“Hindu nationalism risks pushing India into war with China,” blared the headline from China’s nationalist tabloid, *Global Times*.¹ Meanwhile, in Washington, a wide-ranging network of analysts optimistic on U.S.-India ties similarly argue that India’s nationalist political forces will push the country further away from Beijing and likely closer to Washington. These are bold claims about the ways in which national identity will intersect with great power politics. But are they correct?

That question is now more urgent than ever. The Bhartiya Janata Party’s (BJP) sweeping victory in the May 2019 elections shows that Hindu nationalism is the potent political force reshaping the country. But what role does China play in Hindu nationalist narratives, and how might those narratives affect China policy? This paper explores the various threads of Hindu nationalism and chronicles the relatively limited role that China plays within them. First, it explores the history of Hindu nationalism as a political force in India, demonstrating its tendency to view Islam – rather than the West or China – as the salient other. The key nationalist policy priorities for Hindu nationalists—including the introduction of a Uniform Civil Code that reduces sharia’s role in civil law, the repeal of Article 370 of India’s Constitution that protects Kashmir’s special status, and the construction of a Ram temple at Ayodhya on the grounds of what was once a mosque – are all issues that implicate Hindu relations with Islam. Second, after making the argument that Hindu nationalism is primarily focused on Islam, the paper then turns to analyzing China’s role in nationalist ideology. It argues that China plays a relatively limited and often contradictory role in nationalist discourse despite the increasingly contentious Sino-Indian relationship. Hindu nationalists view China through a variety of lenses – sovereignty, trade, and values – each of which produces a different perspective and precludes a singular, unified Hindu nationalist view of China.² And in some areas, Hindu nationalists even admire Chinese approaches.

Despite China’s limited presence in nationalist narratives, among members of the Indian elite and bureaucracy concerns over China dating back to the annexation of Tibet and the 1962 Sino-Indian War are sharpening as China’s power grows. Even so, China’s continued support for Pakistan, its hardening position on the border, its standoffs with India like the one over Doklam, and its growing influence in South Asia appear to be elite rather than popular preoccupations. The Modi government has pursued a modestly more competitive policy with China than its predecessors, but for the most part it has balanced that approach with engagement and sought largely to build on the policies of previous governments – and this effort does not primarily flow from Hindu nationalist impulses. In contrast to countries like Vietnam, where nationalism often focuses externally on China, Hindu nationalism remains focused on an internal other.

Should Hindu nationalism gain greater political power – perhaps at the expense of the historically secular state bureaucracies that are increasingly concerned about China – it may create a modest opening for Beijing, which is less likely than the West to have concerns over India’s majoritarian turn, and may even provide it cover in international bodies on human rights questions. In this way, should the rise of Hindu nationalism and right-wing populism wash over the Indian state, it could inhibit rather than propel the kind of great power balancing that many in the West have long hoped for.

The Rise of Hindu Nationalism – Islam at the Center

Following independence, India remained riven by two broad nationalisms. One was the secular *Indian* nationalism of the early Congress Party, which sought to incorporate the country's linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity. The political project of crafting a unified state out of such a diverse country, it was believed, required an inclusive approach. The other was the religious *Hindu* nationalism of those who saw India as a home for a Hindu majority that had suffered under Muslim and British rule and now had an opportunity to gain political power. This form of Hindu nationalism has often been intertwined with questions of Islam's history and influence in India as well as the trauma of partition, and Muslims have constituted a more salient other in this discourse than the West or China. Indeed, it was anger over the Congress Party's policy on partition that led a nationalist member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi. And yet, the Congress Party's power ensured the victory of secularists so totally that, at least for a time, Hindu nationalism seemed anachronistic. As Milan Vaishnav notes:

Because India's secularists achieved such a dominant victory in the early years of the republic, it is easy to forget that there was a dueling nationalism that may have been defeated, but which hardly disappeared from the scene entirely. The alternative conception of India's identity, Hindu nationalism, has a lineage that actually pre-dates its secular competitor...³

Temporarily defeated, Hindu nationalist ideology was for a time far from the levers of power.

Hindu Nationalism's Organization

Although Hindu nationalism is not monolithic, some of its founding fathers like Vinayak Damodar Sarvkar have argued that those who regard Indian sovereign territory as the fatherland and holy land (Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs) are part of the Hindu community in contrast to Christians, Jews, and especially Muslims. Even among those who might endorse this broad definition, there remain a variety of Hindu nationalist views on how majoritarian and inclusive policy should be.⁴

Organizationally, Hindu nationalists are generally part of the Sangh Parivar, a family of organizations that emerged from the RSS, which began as a "cultural, rather than political, body with the sole purpose of strengthening Hindu society by building civic character, unifying Hindus divided by caste, and enhancing their physical strength through training and exercises."⁵ This bottom-up organization grew rapidly, despite being banned at various points in Indian history, and achieved significant organizational prowess. Other key organizations within the Sangh Parivar include the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the key political vehicle for Hindu nationalism, as well as the religious organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Given the complexities of electoral politics, the BJP is sometimes more moderate in its membership and activities than the VHP and the RSS, but it benefits enormously from the organizational capabilities of the latter two organizations, with talented RSS organizers often joining the Party and entering electoral politics.

Secularism's Erosion and the Focus on Islam

Hindu nationalism's political return is a product of the organizational focus of these organizations and, critically, the erosion of secular nationalism, which was itself the result of decisions made by the Congress Party. The first of those decisions was Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision in 1975 to suspend elections and due process and rule by decree for twenty-one months. The Emergency, as the period was known, saw the RSS and several other Hindu nationalist groups rise as key players in the opposition and also further weakened Gandhi's ruling Congress Party, creating a space for political contestation. After Gandhi called elections and her government promptly fell, these groups briefly gained power for the first time since independence. Although these events did not constitute a direct blow to secularism, they undermined the Congress Party, which had championed secular nationalism, and gave those who subscribed to Hindu nationalism invaluable governing experience.

The second set of decisions that Congress took were far more directly damaging to secularism. In the 1980s, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi decided to politicize religious differences in Punjab to shore up her electoral position. That act facilitated religious extremism, which culminated in Hindu-Sikh violence, with some Congress officials even commandeering state transportation to bus Hindu militants into Sikh neighborhoods.⁶ A few years later, Indira Gandhi's son – then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi – further eroded secularism when he sought to appease conservative Muslims by ensuring the passage of the Muslim Women Bill, a piece of legislation which incorporated bits of sharia law into civil law, preventing some Muslim women from receiving the protection of the civil system in cases of divorce.⁷ The passage of the bill strengthened the argument of those in the BJP that Indian secularism was a farce that advantaged only Muslim minorities at the expense of Hindu expression. The subsequent outrage helped propel the right.

Hindu Nationalism's Politicization

These actions by Congress fractured the secular nationalism of modern India and created a space for others. While Congress did not fully enter the space it had created and was driven by short-term political opportunism, Hindu nationalists more focused on long-term ideological advancement saw an opportunity in the erosion of secularism. After a series of false starts in electoral politics – particularly because the BJP was initially seen as a party of the upper castes and the petty bourgeoisie – Hindu nationalist groups began to turn their attention and considerable organizational heft to highly symbolic Hindu causes focused on Islam's influence and history in the subcontinent. The focus on Islam and on Hindu victimization successfully widened their political base of support.⁸

The Sangh Parivar and its affiliates like the RSS and VHP were the initial leaders in this effort, with the BJP a prime political beneficiary. For example, the VHP condemned conversions to Islam and launched a "politico-cum-religious pilgrimage which sought to map out the mythological unity of Hindudom" in which some 60 million Indians participated.⁹

The most successful nationalist mobilization was the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, which held that the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya was built over a Hindu temple that had previously consecrated the birthplace of Lord Ram. The Babri Masjid was made into a

physical symbol of Hindu victimization at the hands of a Muslim minority, and the BJP benefited from VHP and RSS agitation over the issue and tied itself to the campaign to break the Congress Party's reliance on a coalition of lower-caste and Muslim voters and widen its own support base. L.K. Advani, a BJP leader, launched the *Rath Yatra*, a "chariot" procession which traveled across India and was designed to culminate at Ayodhya. These political stunts were extremely salient and encouraged a kind of movement politics that a focus on the West or on China could not possibly have provided. For example, the VHP encouraged individual Indians to send bricks in for the construction for the Ayodhya temple, implying that it was built by ordinary people from the ground up.¹⁰ In another stunt, the VHP "lit the *Ram Agni*, a specially consecrated torch, in Ayodhya. With this, they lit other torches, and fanned out through the country, lighting torches along the way."¹¹ This use of symbolism allowed the BJP to succeed in gaining public support and appear above politics. And where the BJP dared not go politically, the RSS and VHP could – which ultimately benefited the BJP itself.

The movement helped turn the BJP – and Hindu nationalist ideology -- into a political force in fits and starts. As Corbridge and Harriss note, "The 1996 general elections saw the BJP emerge for the first time as the largest single party, though without significantly expanding the basis of its support numerically, socially or geographically."¹² For the BJP to fulfill its national aspirations, it would need to grow out of the Hindi heartland, find coalition partners, continue increasing support among the lower castes, and become more than a single-issue party.¹³ The Party began to focus more on liberalizing the economy, ending corruption, and tactically deploying Hindu nationalist symbols when helpful.¹⁴ The adaptation proved successful, and the BJP finally achieved national power under Prime Minister Atul Bihari Vajpayee in 1999.¹⁵ Even as Hindu nationalism remained central to the BJP, its effort to moderate with a focus on economics and corruption was supplemented by a kind of elite-focused "great power nationalism." India's nuclear tests, its fast growth, its emergence as a global power, and its widening global engagement were key manifestation of this idea. In 2004, this campaign was enshrined in the "India Shining" slogan, which was clearly based more on great power nationalism than on an otherizing, religious nationalism. And ultimately, that slogan proved inadequate, resulting in the BJP's defeat in that election.

The BJP's initial success in stoking Hindu nationalism – largely by politicizing Islam's role in India – changed Indian politics, resulting in what Niraja Gopal Jayal labels the "saffronization of political discourse."¹⁶ For example, the potency of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign led even Rajiv Gandhi to hold a rally at Ayodhya and to argue in support of the VHP cause.¹⁷ And Jayal adds several other examples of the "BJP-ization" of Congress in the decades following, including the nationalist invocations of Digvijay Singh, Congress chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, who advocated a national ban on cow slaughter and criticized the RSS for seeking to sell, rather than donate, a piece of supposedly sacred land that it possessed.¹⁸ More seriously, in the aftermath of the February 2002 Gujarat riots, Congress President Sonia Gandhi downplayed condemnations of violence against Muslims and decided to "launch the Congress campaign from the precincts of the Ambaji temple," Jayal notes, in an attempt to appeal to heightened Hindu identity.¹⁹ Citing survey data that showed a majority of youth uncomfortable with members from other communal groups, Jayal argues that it is "an alarming sign of the ideological impact of the BJP over the last decade and a reminder that urban and prosperous young Indians are not necessarily liberal or secular."²⁰

Modi's Leadership

The BJP returned to power in the 2014 elections under the leadership of then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, winning an outright majority in the lower house of parliament. Modi's own popularity among Hindu nationalists – notably the RSS and the VHP – ensured their maximum organizational support for his effort. With nationalist support secured, Modi had the ability to broaden his message to economics and anti-corruption issues, winning the support of many disaffected with the Congress Party's perceived mismanagement of the economy. When combined with Modi's own unique charisma and significant political talent, the result was a significant victory for the BJP, with the party winning seats outside its traditional areas of strength. And yet, although the election was primarily fought on economic lines, Hindu nationalism too was an important part. As Milan Vaishnav argues.

Given Modi's bona fides within Hindu nationalist circles, there was no reason to overly tout his Hindutva credentials. However, that certainly does not mean that Hindu nationalist themes were absent from the campaign trail; on the contrary, these messages were deployed in a targeted manner in contexts and geographies where the BJP believed it could benefit from using them. Modi himself routinely attacked the Congress Party for pandering to Muslims by promising them special treatment, and he often embraced Hindu symbols and personalities to extract maximum political mileage.²¹

The BJP used polarizing rhetoric in areas where Hindu-Muslim violence had erupted, and it used the issue of Bangladeshi migration to strengthen its performance in India's northeast.

Once in power, Modi did not make Hindu nationalism the center of his policy agenda, and he was cautious on major nationalist objectives. In 1999, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj had declared, "If the party ever comes to power on its own, it will not shy away from introducing a Uniform Civil Code, repealing Article 370 of the Constitution" and rebuilding the temple at Ayodhya – all issues, incidentally, implicating Hindu relations with Islam.²² And yet, when the BJP did come to power on its own, it did not introduce the uniform civil code, which would have eliminated carveouts for sharia law; it did not repeal Article 370, which gave unique status to the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir; and it did not seek to rebuild the temple at Ayodhya, which would have occurred on the grounds of the demolished Babri Masjid. Despite these delays on major nationalist priorities, as Vaishnav argues, the BJP in power nonetheless "created a space for majoritarianism to flourish," with a particular focus on Islam.²³ The BJP leadership has pushed for rewriting textbooks to downplay Islamic contributions; strengthened laws banning cow slaughter or the sale and possession of beef, which disproportionately affects Muslims; and assented to the selection of Yogi Adityanath as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, a figure who had supported Muslim and Christian conversions to Hinduism and campaigned against Hindu-Muslim relationships. When the economy slowed ahead of the 2019 elections, in part due to the BJP's policies of demonetization and the messy rollout of the Goods and Services Tax, Modi returned Hindu nationalist themes to the forefront, suggesting that the BJP would truly implement the agenda of the wider nationalist movement in its next term of office. Then, only three months before the election, Modi responded to the suicide bombing of Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir - which killed roughly forty people - with an air strike on Jaish-e-Mohammed terror camps in Pakistan. Despite controversy over whether the targets were

hit and the loss of Indian fighter aircraft in the attack, the strike on Pakistan likely helped the BJP remain in power. Polls suggest that those aware of the attack were more likely to overlook the economic situation.²⁴

Since returning to office, and with the economy continuing to slow, Modi has begun to swiftly deliver on the Hindu nationalist movement's core goals. He has made progress on a uniform civil code by criminalizing the triple talaq (which allows Muslim husbands to divorce their wives verbally), ended Article 370 and the special status of Kashmir, and will see the construction of a Ram temple at Ayodhya during his term after a Supreme Court verdict resolved outstanding legal issues preventing construction – thereby fulfilling the Hindu nationalist core agenda.²⁵ Other internal issues continue to focus the attention of the government as well. Following the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the government shut down internet access in the region ahead of anticipated protests. Even after restoring internet access, it continued to block social media sites like Twitter and Facebook.²⁶

As the BJP has entered the space vacated by the erosion of secularism, it has pursued a movement-politics strategy and a nationalist agenda fundamentally motivated by communal issues involving the relationship between Hinduism and Islam in India. Even at the moment of its greatest electoral triumph, these issues remained the core of the BJP's focus, indicating the degree to which the continued hegemony of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics might not necessarily lead to a greater focus on China.

China's Contradictory and Limited Role in Hindu Nationalist Thought

Hindu nationalists are a diverse group, and their perspectives on China – relative to questions related to Islam – are particularly heterogenous. In general, China is not a major part of Hindu nationalist thinking, and Hindu nationalist views of China can be divided into three categories: 1) sovereignty/Tibet; 2) trade; and 3) values.

Sovereignty Disputes and Tibet

Hindu nationalists see China as a threat on issues related to sovereignty disputes and the status of Tibet, though these issues remain far less salient than those involving Pakistan or immigration from Bangladesh. Concerns about China's infringement on Indian sovereignty, however, have a long historical lineage in Hindu nationalist discourse.

Even before independence, Hindu nationalists were very concerned about Chinese incursions into Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan, and along the Himalayan range. As BJP Chairman Ram Madhav notes in his review of nationalist thinking on China, several leading figures expressed their concerns about the Indo-Chinese border. Bipin Chandra Pal, the early twentieth-century nationalist intellectual, warned that the long-term threat to India "came not from pan-Europeanism but from pan-Islamism and Pan-Mongolianism."²⁷ After independence, figures like the nationalist Aurobindo Ghose said that "the basic significance of Mao's Tibetan adventure is to advance China's frontiers right down to India and stand poised to strike at the right moment and with the right strategy."²⁸ Nationalist icon and Congress Party member Sardar Patel in 1950 warned Nehru about China, writing, "Chinese irredentism and communist imperialism are different from the expansionism or

imperialism of the western powers. The former has a cloak of ideology which makes it ten times more dangerous. Under the guise of ideological expansion lie concealed racial, national or historical claims. The danger from the north and northeast, therefore, becomes both communist and imperialist.”²⁹ In short, at least among elite nationalists, China raised serious concerns.

These concerns over sovereignty and Tibet are a product of two aspects of Hindu nationalism: 1) a cultural aspect that stems from the belief that Tibet is a part of the larger Hindu family given Buddhism’s emergence in India and the presence of several Indian holy sites in Tibet; and 2) a strategic aspect, with toughness on the border issue in particular seen as part of a muscular Indian defense posture.

With regard to the first, nationalists in particular feel an affinity for Tibetan Buddhism that shapes their views on China policy. In 1960, the RSS declared that India had a moral responsibility to work for Tibetan independence.³⁰ The intensity of these views increased after the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, particularly among the RSS, as Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle detail in their authoritative history of the RSS. After India’s defeat, RSS head Golwalkar said that India needed universal military service and nuclear weapons to counter China. “Seventy years ago, Swami Vivekananda had specifically warned that China would invade Bharat soon after the Britishers quit,” Golwalkar declared, “For the past eight years we of the Sangh, too, had been unambiguously warning that China had aggressed into our territory at various strategic points.” He further argued India needed a free Tibet as a buffer, and that India should recognize the government of Tibet.³¹ “Let the Dalai Lama [...] declare the independence of Tibet,” Golwalkar proclaimed, “Let us give him all necessary support in carrying on the struggle for his country’s freedom.”³² The highest-level decision-making body of the RSS, the ABKM, issued a resolution declaring, “it is unbecoming and illogical to talk or negotiate with her [China] so long as we do not completely liberate our lost territory,” and it further argued that “Tibet’s freedom is also a must if China’s expansionism is to be contained and the right of all nations to a free existence is to be upheld and permanent security of India’s borders is to be assured.”³³ The ABPS – a high-level RSS meeting – also argued for severing diplomatic ties with China and recognizing the government of the Dalai Lama. In 1999, the RSS established the Bharat-Tibet Sahyog Manch - a small and obscure body intended to boost cooperation between India and Tibet.³⁴ In 2010, the RSS journal *Organiser* said that India “has failed to lift even a little diplomatic finger on their [Tibetans’] behalf.” More recently, in 2017, the RSS advocated that the Dalai Lama receive the highest civilian award India can confer, the Bharat Ratna.³⁵

Reciprocally, the Dalai Lama’s organization is close with the RSS, and these links are often public. He visited RSS headquarters in 2014 and declared that “the RSS has always been with us in our struggle for Tibet.”³⁶ The Tibetan community has been astute in stressing the cultural links between India and Tibet that so appeal to Hindu nationalists. At the 2014 World Hindu Congress, the Dalai Lama said that “Ancient India was our guru” but “not modern India, [because] it is too westernized,” an argument that analyst Krzysztof Iwanek says was “verbal honey” to the ideological RSS.³⁷ Although a few BJP politicians advocate the independence of Tibet (e.g., B.S. Koshiyari), most in the Sangh Parivar have generally refrained from pushing the Modi government hard on this issue. For example, although the Dalai Lama was invited to Modi’s first inauguration, he was not invited to the second inauguration, and criticism of that decision was scarce. In short, although the Tibet issue is a powerful one for nationalists who view the region’s Buddhists as part of a larger Hindu family, it does not substantially shape Indian China policy.

Second, with respect to sovereignty questions, border disputes with China are less salient for the Hindu nationalists than those with Pakistan. The war with China in 1962 was an extraordinary circumstance, and the fact that nationalist sentiments were inflamed then does not tell us precisely how salient China is in Hindu nationalist discourse today, though it does hint at certain common themes. In more recent disputes with China over the border, particularly the 2017 crisis at the China-India-Bhutan trijunction border area of Doklam – the closest India and China have come to armed conflict in many years – the RSS has made public statements. For example, the RSS was strongly supportive of Modi's decision to send Indian troops to confront China during the Doklam crisis, and members of the Sangh Parivar called for boycotts of Chinese goods in response to China's incursions and its decision to cancel pilgrimages for Indian citizens to holy sites in Tibet, notably the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage.³⁸ These bold calls were rarely met with serious organizational efforts, however, and the governing BJP – unlike the RSS and VHP – took a more careful line with these issues.³⁹ Unlike other policy matters, notably communal issues at home or confrontations with Pakistan, the RSS and VHP exercised far less pressure on the BJP to take a more hostile or confrontational line. Even during the crisis, the BJP continued normal interactions with China, seeking to decouple regular interaction from the border or other sensitive issues, and was able to do so relatively free from nationalist pressure. Shortly after the resolution of the crisis, Modi attended the BRICS summit in Xiamen, as did a number of cabinet ministers – all without provoking criticism.⁴⁰ The following year, the RSS was silent on the May 2018 Modi-Xi Wuhan summit aimed at resetting India-China ties.⁴¹ As Andersen and Damle observe, “on such matters [involving China], the RSS leadership is under less pressure at home as few significant interests are directly affected by foreign policy issues.”⁴²

In sum, while high-level figures in the Sangh Parivar may raise issues related to Tibet and the Sino-Indian border, the rank-and-file remain far more concerned about those involving Muslims and Pakistan. As Andersen and Damle conclude, “the RSS leadership...seems prepared to go along with the Modi government's policy of distinguishing India's geostrategic imperatives, as at Doklam, from the valued economic dimensions of the India-China relationship.”⁴³

Economic Nationalism

In the economic domain, Hindu nationalists have conflicting views of China. The economic nationalists generally see Beijing as a threat to India's domestic industry and also observe in China's own domestic protectionism a model for Indian development. But others in the Sangh Parivar are not particularly animated by economic relations with China and continue to focus on other issues.

The main economic nationalist organization within the Sangh Parivar is the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM), a spinoff of the RSS founded in 1991. The organization was founded and long led by the ideologue Swaminathan Gurumurthy, who seeks protection for India's economy, preaches a gospel of economic self-reliance, and condemns globalization. It is currently led by Ashwani Mahajan, an economist. The organization's name draws from the Swadeshi Movement, which harkens back to the boycott of British goods in India during the independence movement, with the name “Swadeshi” meaning “of one's own country.” Although the organization is part of the Hindu nationalist family, it sometimes ties its positions to a wide-ranging set of thinkers – some within and others outside of the right wing. These include B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar,

Ram Manohar Lohia, and Deendayal Upadhyay.⁴⁴ Although the organization often ties its thinking to these ideological roots, it is important to note that small and medium enterprises are a major part of the Sangh Parivar's coalition, and consequently, that the SJM's advocacy may be motivated as much by political considerations as by ideological rigidity.

Although the SJM has a wide-ranging economic agenda, China is increasingly a major priority and central to its work. In 2017, it launched a one-year campaign to raise awareness about excessive imports of Chinese goods, advocating both boycotts and anti-dumping measures.⁴⁵ It also took credit for Modi's tariffs on some Chinese goods levied that same year.⁴⁶ The SJM has generally advocated for boycotts of Chinese goods to promote domestic manufacturing. While their allies in the VHP or RSS also sometimes call for a nation-wide boycott of Chinese goods, such as in response to Beijing's border incursions during the Doklam crisis, the SJM and its fellow economic nationalists are different: they support boycotts of Chinese goods not only in response to Beijing's provocations, but also as a matter of policy. The SJM has tied advocacy of these preferences opportunistically to Sino-Indian tensions. For example, the SJM advocated a boycott in 2017 following territorial disputes with China, in 2019 following China's decision to block the blacklisting of Masson Azhar, again that same year after China refused to blacklist the founder of militant terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed at the UN, and following Chinese criticism of Indian policy in Kashmir.⁴⁷ The SJM also opposes free trade agreements, particularly those involving China. In October 2019, the SJM led a ten-day protest of India's possible participation in RCEP, declaring it would "effectively function as an FTA with China."⁴⁸ In a statement, the SJM said:

The trade deficit with China is at an alarming level of \$54 billion. It is a well-known fact that the non-tariff barriers are the main cause of denial of market access to China. There is nothing in the RCEP to effectively discipline the non-tariff barriers (such as Mutual Recognition Agreements) and its exclusive focus on tariff reduction would be bringing an end to Indian manufacturing...⁴⁹

The SJM was hardly alone on this issue. The Sangh Parivar family, as well as most of the BJP, was also opposed to RCEP – as was the opposition Congress Party. After India decided not to join RCEP, the SJM, in a demonstration of its protectionist preferences, encouraged the BJP to consider rethinking or withdrawing from other trade agreements, such as those with Japan and Korea.⁵⁰ After withdrawing from RCEP, the BJP's spokesman for economic affairs, Gopal Krishna, issued a statement that revealed the limits of the SJM's thinking among some in the BJP. "Our politics is right centre," he declared, "we believe in the market economy and the open economy," implicitly rejecting the SJM's economic view.⁵¹

Even so, the SJM appears to be gaining policy influence, and the leaders of the movement are themselves increasingly serving in Indian politics. Perhaps seeking to further institutionalize its preferences on China policy, the SJM has pushed the government to create a "China cell" within the Ministry of Commerce to attend to the trade balance with China.⁵² More specifically, SJM founder Gurusurthy, long influential in Sangh Parivar circles – in 2015, BJP President Amit Shah and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley flew to attend his daughter's wedding – is now making and not simply influencing policy. He has waged a campaign to remove "foreign" influence from the Reserve Bank of India, and in 2018, found himself appointed to the board of the bank, an enormous departure from its previously technocratic focus.⁵³ He continues to be critical of China on economic matters.

Similarly, the current head of the SJM Ashwani Mahajan shares Gurumurthy's hostility to imports and investment from China, having written critically about China's Belt and Road Initiative, accusing it of serving as debt-trap diplomacy.⁵⁴ The SJM under Mahajan has also sought to revoke China's Most-Favored Nation trade status and to ban Chinese social media apps (e.g., TikTok) as well as e-commerce platforms.⁵⁵ It has also pursued a robust campaign against Chinese telecommunications manufacturers, notably Huawei, with Mahajan declaring that they constitute "an unacceptable security risk."⁵⁶ He further argued that "India must recognize the full extent of the national and economic security threat posed by foreign and especially Chinese equipment in India's ICT (information and communication technology) networks" and argued that "China today controls a significant section of India's telecom networks, even though information dominance is at the core of China's military strategy." The SJM has kept up the pressure, criticizing Indian ministers from attending Huawei-sponsored conferences or allowing Huawei to participate in domestic trials.⁵⁷ To be clear, the SJM does not necessarily advocate for the usage of other foreign companies like Ericsson and Nokia; their preference is for India to develop its own telecom manufacturers, perhaps taking a lesson from China's own approach.

The SJM's concern over economic ties with China should not be confused with reflexively anti-China views. Indeed, though SJM nationalists wish to reduce China's economic influence in India, they also admire China's economic success as well as its protectionist and mercantilist approaches. For example, Gurumurthy is an open admirer of Deng Xiaoping, and once said that Modi has the potential to lift India like Deng did China." He noted that "Deng did what works in [and] for China. Now Modi plans the same." Gurumurthy has some unusual views on China's economic success, arguing that "Deng never spoke English, but he understood what would develop China. He knew it was not FDI. He silently built the economy from the bottom."⁵⁸ The SJM sees China as an example of a major economy that used small and medium enterprises to propel the country forward and advocates the same for India.

Despite their exertions, the economic nationalists have been unsuccessful in reshaping India's economic policy away from China and away from globalization. During the 1990s, the SJM was harshly critical of the Vajapayee government for continuing the liberalizing reforms of its predecessor, as well as for appointing a non-RSS member as the head of the Reserve Bank of India. And yet, despite the criticism, the BJP proceeded to push for modest liberalization. Under Modi's government, the SJM has had more influence – particularly with respect to demonetization, foreign retail, monetary policy, and increasingly policies on data and digital economy. And yet, on issues related to China, the BJP has largely pursued its own course and has been unwilling to jeopardize economic ties with China, which is India's largest trading partner by goods, to satisfy the SJM. In general, the rest of the Sangh Parivar has deferred to the BJP on these issues. As Andersen and Damle note:

The RSS has not backed the SJM's demand that the Modi government stop Chinese investments and put regulatory hurdles on the operations of Indian companies with significant Chinese investment....In short, the rest of the Parviar does not buy into the SJM's policy prescription that incidents like the Doklam incursions justify a prohibition of all Chinese investments in India...

[and] such incidents do not necessarily mean that China is an imminent threat as long as India makes clear that it has the will and means to defend its strategic interests."⁵⁹

Meanwhile, joint ventures in renewable energy, electric vehicles, e-commerce, digital payments, and a range of other industries are critical to India's modernization goals and have continued. India remains the second-largest shareholder in AIIB, even though it has not participated in BRI. And Chinese manufacturers like Huawei, Xiaomi, Gionee, LeEco, Oppo, and Vivo have opened manufacturing operations in India. Modi continues to pursue Chinese investment across a range of industries.⁶⁰ And despite the frequency of SJM calls for a different approach, the rest of the Sangh Parivar has been more flexible. For example, the RSS did not object to Modi courting Chinese investment and exports to China during his tenure as Gujarat chief minister, nor has it or the VHP seriously done so during his tenure as prime minister.⁶¹ The limited success of the SJM on these issues is likely related to China's importance to India, as well as to the limited salience of economic issues involving China among the broader public.

Asian Values

The Sangh Parivar is generally skeptical of Western values and liberalism, and sometimes sees China as a kindred civilizational spirit standing against an interventionist and culturally expansionary West. As a demonstration of the multifaceted way Hindu nationalists see China, some of these individuals may in one breath criticize China for dumping products in India, its policies in Tibet, or its encroachments on the border, but nonetheless simultaneously attack Western civilization while making common cause with Beijing on broader questions of values.

For most foundational Hindu nationalist authors, Hinduism's value was defined in contrast to the West. Many, like Swami Vivekananda saw the West as material and Hinduism as spiritually superior: "On metaphysical lines, no nation on earth can hold a candle to the Hindus," he argued in 1897, "it seems however advanced the Western nations are in scientific culture, they are mere babies in metaphysical and spiritual education."⁶² Other nationalist thinkers reiterated some of these views, including Savarkar. After independence, these themes persisted among key nationalist thinkers. For example, Modi's favorite Hindu nationalist thinker, Deen Dayal Upadhyay, put forward a concept he called "integral humanism" that outlined a vision of Hinduism's contributions relative to Western thinking. As Rahul Sagar explains, Upadhyay's thinking suggests that "India has more to teach than to learn from the world because, unlike the West, which prioritizes the material over the social and the spiritual, Hinduism understands that the good life is the 'integrated life'—a life that fulfils the plurality of human needs and aspirations."⁶³ Upadhyaya discouraged the "thoughtless imitation of the West," particularly its consumerist and materialist impulses.⁶⁴ Similarly, RSS head Golwalkar argued, "The Western theory of creating multiplicity of wants, more machinery to meet them will only result in making man the slave of machine."⁶⁵

The distaste for Western approaches has often led to a feeling of affinity with Asian civilizations, particularly because nationalists regard with pride the historical spread of Buddhism to the rest of Asia. During the independence struggle, early nationalist organizations such as the Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj, and the Hindu Mahasabha were generally pro-Asian, had concerns over the West, and celebrated Asian victories against imperialists—such as Japan's 1905 victory against Russia. Decades later, Indian leaders—including former Congress Party members Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who was influenced by the nationalist Brahma Samaj— even cooperated with Japan during WWII against the British.⁶⁶

In the present day, these pan-Asian impulses remain. Indeed, modern China is sometimes seen in these terms. As Andersen and Damle argue in their review of the RSS, “China is also part of the East that the RSS finds culturally and strategically appealing against a domineering and threatening West. Xi Jinping has, more than any recent Chinese leader, stressed the importance of tradition and some of that tradition has common roots in India.”⁶⁷

These themes are important elements of contemporary Hindu nationalism. Concerns about Westernization animate many of the mass militant actions nationalists take against movies, books, and other cultural items they believe belie Hindu culture. Many members of the Sangh Parivar are aghast at what they perceive as Western decadence, commercialization, and excessive deference to minority groups. With regard to the latter, although many Western states banned Modi after the 2002 Gujarat riots, China did not.⁶⁸

A subset of these same individuals are drawn to pan-Asian thinking, and these themes have even appeared in speeches by Modi and have been incorporated into Indian foreign policy. For example, Indian civil society has organized the annual Samvad conference which seeks to bring together key figures and scholars from around Asia to discuss Hinduism and Buddhism. The conference has featured Modi and Prime Minister Abe, high-level officials from other countries, academics, and religious leaders – including Tibetans. The conference is self-consciously pan-Asian. For example, in Modi's 2015 address to the conference, he declared, “Ethical values of personal restraint in consumption and environmental consciousness are deeply rooted in Asian philosophical traditions, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism.” He also singled out “Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism” as taking a similar approach, implicitly critiquing the West for its shortcomings in this regard relative to Asian approaches.⁶⁹

Top Sangh Parivar officials sometimes go even further, grounding their critiques of the West and their preference for majoritarian nationalism in pan-Asian terms. Gurumurthy – the influential economic nationalist – has a history of expressing these kinds of sentiments, occasionally drawing China into critiques of the West. “The West will target all non-western global leaders, be it Putin, Xi, Abe, or Modi, all of whom [are] nationalist. The West will never allow nationalist leaders to rise in non-western geographies.”⁷⁰ Similarly, “Japan's answer to Western modernity is Nihonjinron. China's is Neo-Confucianism,” he noted before asking what India's would be.⁷¹ Writing on the Samvad conference, he noted, its purpose was to “shift the West-centric narrative into a world-centric and Asia-inclusive one.” Many in the Sangh Parivar would welcome this approach. They may also be receptive to similar language from China. When Beijing hosted the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, it invited hundreds from across Asia and wrapped the proceedings in the language of Asian values pitted against Western ones. For example, a typical Xinhua piece argued, “Many Westerners are obsessed with Western style centralism” and “have seen the rapid development of non-Western countries, and Asian countries in particular, which has made them sensitive and narrow-minded.” It further warned that Western “hostility toward foreign civilizations only agitate their differences and contradictions, and can ignite bloody conflicts.”⁷³

In a few small but highly important cases, Hindu nationalists have – perhaps motivated partly by these sentiments or for other reasons – encouraged conciliatory China policies. For example, BJP upper-house parliamentarian and former Indian minister Subramaniam Swamy has defended his pro-China views by saying “they are our neighbours and we

share cultural similarities. As the Chinese President said, if India and China come together, the whole world watches.”⁷⁴ Swamy opposes Indian involvement in the South China Sea, encourages greater distance between the U.S. and India, blames the U.S. and India for the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and has said the Dalai Lama’s followers must shut down their political apparatus in India.⁷⁵ Although he is a prominent BJP figure, Swamy’s views are nonetheless outside the mainstream, and the current BJP government under Modi has not moved in the direction he advocates. Even the Sangh Parivar generally does not share these views. For example, the RSS has supported Modi’s decision to include Japan as a regular participant in the Malabar naval exercises, to avoid participating in BRI, and to raise issues related to Pakistan-based terrorism with China.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Hindu nationalism is a project animated by Hinduism’s relationship with Islam, whether at the domestic level or the international level, and views of China are less salient and less consistent. Nationalist leaders oppose China’s assertiveness on the border and its repression of Buddhists in Tibet, but not so much that they would push a BJP government to pursue dramatically tougher positions on those issues. They may be concerned about the volume of Chinese exports to India, but those protectionist impulses are relatively widespread, and many economic nationalists also see China as worthy of emulation. They may be skeptical of Westernization and drawn to “Asian values” approaches, seeing China as a kindred spirit, but that affinity has, at least so far, not substantially reshaped politics. Taken together, the contradictory impulses on sovereignty, trade, and values questions related to China and the limited mass appeal of these issues strongly suggest that if Hindu nationalism strengthens, China policy is unlikely to harden as a direct result of that trend. Contrary to the fears of Chinese polemicists and Western great power strategists, nationalist politics are unlikely to induce greater Indian balancing against China on its own.

To the contrary, it is possible that Hindu nationalism’s intensification could actually produce greater strains in India’s relationship with the United States, creating modest openings for China. The majoritarian impulses of the Sangh Parivar, particularly on questions related to India’s Muslim population, have drawn criticism from the American media, activists, scholars, and members of Congress. If India’s treatment of Muslims becomes a political issue within the United States and other liberal democracies, and if those concerns become translated into policy, Hindu nationalists will say that their suspicions about the West have been confirmed. At the same time, despite Beijing’s criticism of India’s revocation of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status under Article 370, China is unlikely to be nearly as critical of India’s domestic governance. Paradoxically then, stronger Hindu nationalism and the resultant Western backlash could intensify those veins of nationalist discourse that stress commonality with China and come at the expense of closer Indian ties to the United States.

Endnotes

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