Hinduism and democracy

Religion and politicized religion in India

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Introduction

Scholars of politics often ask some form of the following question: “Is (some religion) compatible with democracy?” The question is most commonly asked or implied with respect to Islam: “Is Islam compatible with democracy?” (Esposito and Voll 1996; Fukuyama 2001; Huntington 2011). If we believe that such questions are asked and answered largely on the basis of political experience—for example, the patchy and troubled history of democracy in many countries of the Middle East—then the case of India might seem to suggest that Hinduism (the overwhelming majority religion of India at about 80% of the population) is highly compatible with democracy. India—virtually alone in the developing world—has been a stable, institutionalized democracy since independence in 1947, with only one interruption of emergency rule for 18 months between 1975 and 1977. In South Asia, only Sri Lanka shares this distinction with India.

Prior to independence, many leaders of the Indian Muslim community feared that in a democracy, Hindus would naturally predominate as a permanent majority. The stunning—and largely unpredicted—electoral victory by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party; BJP) in India in 2014 might on its face seem to validate those fears: A political party claiming to represent Hinduism and speak for the Hindu majority won national elections in a landslide. Major news outlets in India in the days leading up to the election were predicting approximately 220 seats (out of 545 in the Lok Sabha or lower house of the Indian Parliament) for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the BJP-led coalition that governed from 1999 to 2004, the first time the party was in power. In fact, the BJP won 282 by itself, while the NDA coalition won 336 seats. Neither the scale of the BJP’s victory nor the possibility that the party would win an absolute majority on its own was predicted or anticipated by even the most seasoned observers of Indian politics. Surely, this election result represented the political triumph of Hinduism in India’s democracy?

We argue that the relationship between religion and democracy is not that simple, even in the case of India. To interpret what the 2014 election results meant for Hinduism and democracy in India, it is important to understand two things: first, that the BJP doesn’t represent Hinduism as much as it represents Hindu nationalism; and second, even the BJP’s
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landslide victory didn’t necessarily represent a popular embrace of Hindu nationalism. We argue that the BJP represents politicized Hinduism rather than Hinduism as a religion. We define politicized religion as the mobilization of religious symbols, discourses, and narratives for political gain—in the case of democracy, for electoral gain. It is worth noting that the BJP won only 31% of the popular vote; this translated into 51.7% of seats in the Lok Sabha (282/545) because of India’s first-past-the-post electoral system. Rather than a popular embrace of its Hindu nationalist ideology, the election victory reflected as much a rejection of the incumbent Congress Party (leading the United Progressive Alliance or UPA) and the personal popularity of Narendra Modi as the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate.

In power continuously for 10 years, the UPA was seen as sclerotic, out of touch with the grassroots, and entangled in corruption—the sure end of any national government in India. The Congress Party was exposed as completely reliant on the Nehru-Gandhi family line of succession for leadership. Congress was seen as favoring the rural poor, while the BJP under Modi promised to favor industry and the urban middle classes. Modi’s popularity, in turn, was driven by promises of fast economic growth, as took place in the state of Gujarat when he was Chief Minister from 2001 to 2014, serving four consecutive terms. Modi remained highly popular, despite his lingering association with the deadly 2002 riots in Gujarat state, in which thousands—mostly Muslims—were killed. During the 2014 election campaign, Modi himself de-emphasized Hindu nationalist ideology to focus more on the record of economic growth in Gujarat; but his close advisers, like Amit Shah, played up the themes of Hindu nationalism and kept the ideology visible (A. R. 2014).

In this chapter, we examine the evolution and growth of Hindu nationalism as politicized religion in Indian democracy over time, distinguishing it from Hinduism as religion—and we do so through the lens of gender. By focusing on gender and the role of women, we are able to denaturalize the presumed link between religion and politicized religion, exposing instead the contingent and constructed nature of that relationship. We undertake close reading and interpretation of two different literatures—the general comparative political science literature on religion and politics, and the literature on women in Hindu nationalism in India. Reading them against each other, we find that the former is skewed toward focusing almost exclusively on the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and on women in Islam, while the latter has remained myopically engaged over time with questions defined primarily from a secular-feminist perspective that close off other possible interpretations.

Through our analysis, we argue that the politicization of religion is not inevitable in a democracy. Two key points emerge. First, religion must be analytically distinguished from politicized religion—as we distinguish Hinduism from Hindu nationalism. Second, having made this distinction, we argue that religion does not automatically become politicized religion in a democracy (as Muslim leaders feared before independence). Instead, the politicization of religion is a process that must be assiduously constructed or built over time—as Hindu nationalism has been. Our findings suggest the contingent and constructed nature of the process of politicizing religion in a democracy rather than a natural, automatic, or inevitable outcome. We point toward the need to excavate the specific work done by women and gender in politicized Hinduism as a way to address the question of why not just women, but anyone, participates in Hindu nationalist politics.

In the next section we trace the patchy electoral record and changing roles of women in Hindu nationalist politics in India prior to the 2014 election. The third section expands on the distinction between Hinduism and Hindu nationalism, while the fourth section examines two bodies of literature to help explain or understand the role of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism in Indian democracy: the general comparative literature on religion and politics,
and the literature on women in Hindu nationalism. The conclusion ties together the insights of each section and considers possible implications of our study for other religions and regions of Asia and beyond.

**Hindu nationalism in India: politics and women**

As the political arm of the larger Hindu nationalist movement, the BJP and its predecessors (the Hindu Mahasabha or HMS and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh or BJS) have contested elections for a long time. But the political path of Hindu nationalism in India shows varying levels of success and failure over time. Distinct from the social wing of the movement, the political wing has faltered at times, advancing only in fits and starts (see Figure 37.1). It was only towards the end of the 1980s that Hindu nationalist political parties began to build significant electoral support, despite the fact that Hindus have never been less than an 80% majority of the population of India throughout the 70-year period since independence. This indicates that there is no simple “ethnic census”—where all members of an identity group vote for a candidate or party of that group—that drives support for the BJP.

The genesis of organized Hindu nationalist politics can be traced to the early twentieth century in northwestern India. The first All-India Conference of Hindus was held in April 1915. During the 1920s, the movement became the All-India Hindu Mahasabha and contested elections as a political party. This movement greatly radicalized its agenda and expanded its base of support under the ascendancy of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (commonly known as Veer Savarkar). Then, in 1925, Dr K.B. Hedgewar founded a new organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); within a few years, the RSS displaced the HMS as the center of gravity and anchor organization of Hindu nationalism (Andersen and Damle 1987; T. Basu 1993; Hansen 1999). Dr Hedgewar declared the RSS an apolitical group while pursuing provocative and violent strategies to initiate Hindu-Muslim violence.
The Hindu nationalist movement suffered a huge blow when a man previously associated with it assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. The RSS was banned, its leaders were arrested, and the public mood turned very hostile. This experience convinced RSS leaders that even as the organization itself remained formally apolitical, it needed some voice in the political mainstream. Thus, the RSS established a political party—the BJS—which drew members and leaders from the HMS and made some political progress (Graham 1990). But by 1980, the BJS had broken up, and a new party with old faces was launched: the BJP.

In the early and mid-1980s, the BJP began engaging in political mobilization, spearheaded by two key campaigns: the Shah Bano controversy and the Ayodhya campaign (discussed later). In 1999, the BJP finally won enough seats with its allies in the NDA to form the national government. In 2002, an anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat killed over 2,000 people, destroyed the homes of thousands, and showed the terrifying possibilities of the BJP being (with the indicated change) in power at both the state and central levels of government (Human Rights Watch 2003; A. Basu 2015). In 2004, the party was expected to win reelection but lost badly to a Congress-led UPA coalition that promised more inclusive growth and protection of minorities; this electoral failure was repeated, only worse, in 2009.

So, the BJP languished in opposition for a decade, from 2004 to 2014. This period saw tensions and elite disagreements between the BJP and its affiliated social movement organizations over ideology, generational turnover, and patronage. Thus, the surprising results of the 2014 election were not inevitable. Rather, particular organizational and mobilizational strategies deployed over the past 30 years had finally come to pay off electorally. These victories were the result of decades of Hindu nationalist investment in local communities through social outreach, such as provision of education and health care (Thachil 2014), and innovative—and gendered—campaigns that mobilized people on the basis of fear and jingoism (Deo 2016). This patchy history can be traced through the evolving role of women in the movement and the party.

**Women in Hindu nationalism**

Women and gender played a significant role in the BJP’s rise to power in the 1980s, but they were not always central in Hindu nationalist politics. In the early 1900s, at the origins of the movement, women were largely excluded from its structures and activities. A few attempted to become involved and convince male Hindu nationalist leaders to involve women more actively, but these efforts went unrealized (Williams 2013). Seemingly constrained by deeply patriarchal ideologies grounded in religion and nationalism that saw the place of women as in the home, Hindu nationalism in its early years could not or would not find ways to include women in its activities. This perspective is captured in a 1938 statement made by Hindu nationalist leader Bhai Parmanand:

There is a great campaign in progress in this country to safeguard the rights of women. In the opinion of those who champion this cause, they should be treated equally with men. It is urged that they should be accorded representation in the Legislatures [sic], Municipalities and other public bodies. But I am absolutely opposed to this. The woman is the flower of the home. Her kingdom is the domestic sphere and her most important mission in life is to be the mother of the race. She has been made by nature to play her role in the home in the same way as a man’s field is in the outside world.
The political wing of the movement in the early 1900s persisted in this exclusionary approach, even as the social wing, represented by the RSS, began to evolve toward some inclusion of women. The RSS was, and remains, an organization that only men can join and belong to. This is rather remarkable for an organization that claims to try to build a Hindu nation from the grassroots, given the widely understood critical role of women in nation-building (Yuval-Davis 1997). In 1927, two years after the RSS was founded, a woman named Lakshmibai Kelkar, whose husband and son were active in the RSS, approached Dr Hedgewar and pleaded with him to try to persuade him to let women join; he wouldn’t budge. Finally, they reached a compromise: He allowed her to form a women’s wing, which she called the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (or “Samiti”), which would work off the basic philosophy of the parent organization but independently. The Samiti today has an expanded membership and engages in social work and support functions with and for the RSS (Bacchetta 2004; Menon 2005).

It was not until the 1980s that the BJP as the political wing of Hindu nationalism began to involve and mobilize women and gendered discourses. Two major campaigns—the Shah Bano controversy and the Ayodhya campaign—are widely understood to have launched the BJP on a path to political power, and both were gendered in different but critical ways. In 1985–1986, the BJP got involved in a controversy over a Supreme Court decision to grant maintenance (alimony) to a divorced Muslim woman, Shah Bano Begum. Conservative Muslim leaders opposed the decision based on sharia law as commonly practiced in India; they began protests and demonstrations against it. In response, the ruling Congress Party made legislative attempts to overturn the decision. But progressive Muslims, women’s rights activists, and the BJP opposed the Congress and defended the Supreme Court decision with their own protests and demonstrations. The BJP claimed to be defending Muslim women’s legal rights, but their stance was widely understood as anti-Muslim: a way to deprive the minority Muslim community of the right to practice their own religious laws on family matters (Kishwar 1986; Williams 2006, Ch. 6). Startled and surprised to find themselves on the same side of the issue as the BJP, feminist activists reassessed their position on religious laws, moving to an approach that called for options and choices for women and families in which laws they wish to follow (Menon 2000, 84–91).

The Shah Bano controversy gave the BJP its first taste of political success with a gendered turn. The second major mobilization in the BJP’s rise to power was the campaign to replace a medieval mosque, the Babri Masjid, with a Hindu temple at the alleged birthplace of the revered Hindu deity Lord Rama in Ayodhya in northern India. In December 1992, as the culmination of a nationwide campaign of mobilization, Hindu nationalist kar sevaks (volunteers) converged on Ayodhya and over a few hours destroyed the mosque. This was followed by riots all over the country and particularly bloody violence in Mumbai. Several prominent women played dramatic and visible roles in the Ayodhya campaign: just the best known included Uma Bharati, Sadhvi Ritambhara, and (the late) Vijaya Raje Scindia (A. Basu 1993a). These women—and most especially the former two—gave speeches and recorded cassettes that called on (Hindu) men to protect Hindu women and religion against Muslims. Throughout the campaign leading up to the destruction of the mosque and on the day the mosque was destroyed, Hindu nationalist women exhorted the crowds, mostly men, to tear down the mosque, taunting them to “man up,” to behave like men and defend Hinduism—even as that meant violence against minority communities, especially Muslims. One observer called the Ayodhya conflict a “turning point” in the role of women in Hindu nationalism.

In these ways, the BJP’s rise to national political power cannot be disentangled, empirically or theoretically, from its increasing engagement with women and gender in the 1980s–1990s. Today, as it returns to national political power, the BJP has evolved a more routinized incorporation of women into its structures and activities, rather than the exclusionary approach...
of the early 1900s or the mobilizations of the 1980s–1990s (Williams, in progress). What is evident from the empirical record is that like the politicization of Hinduism itself, women’s involvement in Hindu nationalist politics had to be constructed and was not a natural or inevitable outcome. The BJP took several decades to register significant electoral victories in India’s democratic political system. But we argue that rather than representing Hinduism as a religion, the BJP represents an ideology of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva (loosely translated as “Hindu-ness”); we turn in the next section to expand on the differences between these.

Hinduism and its politicized other: Hindu nationalism

While it is certainly true that for centuries, religion has moved people and given them a sense of community, Hinduism as a religion is not necessarily a strong or obvious candidate to serve as a mobilizing political force. The term “Hindu” referred historically to the people east of the Indus River. Though Hindus comprised just under 80% of the population of India in 2011 (CIA Factbook 2017), they are riven along caste, sectarian, linguistic, and regional lines among others. The meaning and practice of Hinduism varies considerably across India. There is no agreed upon central text to serve as a common source of authority. Rather, a number of texts, written in different centuries, offer sometimes conflicting accounts of virtue and vice (Fuller 1992; Flood 2003).

A combination of textual plurality, heterogeneous practice, and caste politics make the idea of a “Hindu community” rather abstract if not politically untenable. There are a multiplicity of gods and many ways of worshipping each. Temples frequently are consecrated to one main deity but many others are also accorded space within. This variation has broad regional patterns, with some gods more popular in the north than the south of the country. Often within the same family one can find devotees of different gods and ways of worship. Each family has a deity associated with it based on their ancestral village and subcaste membership, but sometimes, these are set aside to pray to a more popular god. Different gods serve different purposes and have different forms of devotion associated with them.

Temples are not centers of community life on a regular basis and do not serve fixed congregations. People come and go as they please, with the fortunes of a temple varying seasonally and over longer periods of time. Certainly, there are a number of swamis and gurus who accept disciples and may even have ashrams where a strong sense of community can grow, but those who reside in ashrams have renounced the material world and make poor activists for social movements.

Caste divisions are based on religious understandings that divide people on the basis of descent. Caste is a socially sanctioned means of perpetuating hierarchy and domination among groups who live in proximity to one another (Dirks 2001; Jaffrelot 2003; Chandra 2004). It divides Hindus into closed endogamous communities. The historical legacy of caste-based discrimination and exclusion leads to deep distrust between members of different caste groups. The politicization of caste over the past century has sustained and even intensified the polarization of Hindus. In practice, there are thousands of caste groups but all can be ranked in relation to one another and classified according to a five-part schema. The ranking of castes reflects socioeconomic and political distinctions that are similar to but not coterminous with class divisions. Caste identity remains an excellent predictor of political preferences in India (Deo 2016, Ch. 3).

While all of the major world religions are practiced in a variety of ways by adherents, Hinduism is unusual in that it is fragmented at the level of high tradition as well as low. This refers to the split between folk understandings and practices of a religious tradition and the scholarly or ecclesiastical version of it. In the case of Hinduism, there is a high tradition that is deeply philosophical and Brahmanical, often called the Sanatana Dharma—while at the
level of everyday practice, multiple varieties of Bhakti (devotional) movements foreground deeply personal relationships with particular deities through worship practices.

For all these reasons, it would be a mistake to assume that the BJP victory implies the political dominance of Hindus or Hinduism in India. The first step in politicizing Hinduism is convincing people that “Hindu” is an important aspect of their personhood. It is an even further step to convince them that their differences from other Hindus cease to matter for political purposes. Singling out any dimension of a person’s identity and using that as the basis for political mobilization is a difficult process under normal circumstances and if anything, in the case of Hinduism it is especially so.

The Hindutva ideology that mobilizes BJP supporters is starkly distinct from Hinduism as a religion. Its earliest and still most relevant articulation was laid out in a text penned in 1928 by Veer Savarkar titled *Who Is a Hindu?* Hindutva at its core is a philosophy of ethnic nationalism that virtually equates being Indian with being Hindu. Hindu nationalist ideology holds that true Indians are those that have India both as their birthplace and as their holy land, or the place where their religion originated. This immediately defines Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists as “real Indians” while placing Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Parsis (Zoroastrians) outside the national fold.

But then Hindutva further holds that Hinduism is not merely a religion but more broadly a culture and a way of life shared by every Indian regardless of their religion. In the words of prominent BJP leader L. K. Advani, “India may be multilingual, multireligious, multiracial. But the culture is one. The culture is Hinduism.” Or as their 1996 Election Manifesto put it,

> [t]he BJP is committed to the concept of one nation, one people, one culture—our nationalist vision is not merely bound by the geographical or political identity of India, but defined by our ancient cultural heritage.

This common cultural heritage is Hinduism. Anyone who does not subscribe to Hinduism as the dominant Indian culture and way of life is not really Indian and therefore has suspect national loyalties. But party leaders insist that minorities—especially Muslims—have nothing to fear from Hindutva, declaring that non-Hindus would no more be second-class citizens in a BJP-run India than non-Christians are second-class citizens in Western countries:

> France is a Christian country, so is Britain, in the same way that India is a Hindu country. Does that mean that non-Christians are treated as second-class citizens in France and Britain? Does that mean non-Hindus are second-class citizens? Of course not.

This culturally nationalist vision has been a central reason for the party’s lack of popularity among India’s minority communities and its image as an anti-Muslim party in particular. The BJP has argued that Congress-style secularism—which has historically sought to ensure special protections for minorities—is what they call “pseudo-secularism” and is mere appeasement of minorities for vote-bank purposes. Two of their key planks towards religious minorities were represented in the mobilization campaigns described earlier: the elimination of multicultural protections for religious minorities (as they agitated for in the Shah Bano controversy) and the construction of a Hindu temple to Lord Rama at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. The party’s third major plank towards religious minorities has been the elimination of Article 370 of the Constitution, which grants special status to Jammu & Kashmir—the only Muslim-majority state in India (Williams 2006, Ch. 6).

If the relation between Hinduism, Hindu nationalism, and democratic politics in India is so complex, what insights can relevant literatures offer to unravel it? In the next section, we
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examine two such literatures: the general comparative political science literature on religion and politics and the specific work on women in Hindu nationalism.

Reading two literatures

Religion and politics: Abrahamic religions and women in Islam

Comparative political science literature on religion and politics was relatively sparse for decades, with a sudden burst after the 9/11 terror attacks. Suddenly there was an urgent need to understand how religion could motivate political action and how political behavior could shape religion. In many ways, political science has been learning from sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and other disciplines how to think about these questions. As a young literature, it is not surprising that it still has many lacunae. We believe that paying attention to the Indian case of Hindu nationalism as politicized religion through a gender lens can offer new insights for the study of religion and politics more broadly.

Two key shortcomings of the comparative literature are especially highlighted by the Indian case. The first is its almost complete focus on Abrahamic models of religion. What do you miss when you only study or focus on Abrahamic religions? The most basic problem is that the Abrahamic religions include a bare majority of the world population: 54.9% (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). This leaves almost half the global population unaccounted for—and does not even take into account the regional, local, country- and culture-wise variations between the Abrahamic religions themselves. A Protestant understanding of religion as text-based, monotheistic, congregationalist, and concerned with individual salvation gets grafted onto Judaism and Islam in ways that don't quite fit but are serviceable enough. But it certainly misses what religion looks like in the non-Abrahamic world.

This error is visible in studies like Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart’s cross-national comparison of religion and politics (2011) or Samuel Huntington’s civilizational model (2011). Among their failures is the orientalist trap of assuming religion is text based and that we can know what adherents think about a particular issue by reference to a founding text. In the case of Hinduism, as discussed earlier, there is no founding text or canon that gives rise to a unified creed or belief system (Grzymala-Busse 2012). The monotheistic assumption breaks down in polytheistic or nontheistic religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Daoism. The nature of the relationship between the individual and the divine is very different, as are understandings of morality and the afterlife. The ways in which Abrahamic subjects are thought to act in response to an all-seeing and judging deity simply don’t apply as ways of understanding behavior in other religious traditions. The absence of a congregation and the practice of private worship also means that assumptions about how social norms are formed and promulgated don’t apply. In a context like Hinduism in which most religious activity takes place within the home, public religion takes on a very different cast. The modes of organizing socially and generating networks for mobilization are also very different than in a congregational model.

If we ask questions about religion and politics from a non-Abrahamic perspective, religion no longer seems such an obvious candidate to mobilize vast numbers. Instead we might see that religion can be a poor candidate for mass mobilization as it has to overcome differences of theology, resolve logistical obstacles of gathering people together, achieve penetration into individual homes in the absence of a tradition of text study, and provide novel motivations for action. This is not to suggest that Hindus or Buddhists have not historically managed to engage in political campaigns. But it does draw our attention to the critical importance
of modernity and democratic forms of government as shaping the particular ways in which religious identity becomes salient in non-Abrahamic and postcolonial societies. At the very least we see that the process of politicizing Hinduism shows the dangers of naturalizing politicized religion.

The case of India forces scholars to consider what religion is in a different way. It makes us look at the “transition from religion as a set of practices that reproduce a belief system to religious ideology deployed as a tool of political mobilization and party politics” as a process that involves considerable effort (Feldman 1998: 35). Ultimately, the work that religious or political entrepreneurs have to do to mobilize people by faith is as difficult as the work that any social movement actor must engage in.

The second shortcoming of the comparative literature on religion and politics has been its peculiar focus on the question of gender almost solely in regard to just one religion: Islam. Many scholars have been highly critical of Western scholarship’s fascination with the alleged or assumed oppression of Muslim women (Mernissi 1987, 1992; Abu-Lughod 1998, 2013; Moghadam 2003; Mahmood 2005; Scott 2007). What do you miss when you focus only on women in Islam? Such an approach places undue emphasis on just one religion, constructing it as somehow especially oppressive of women. The political agendas surrounding such an approach undermine the legitimacy of these analyses: Is the purpose to study the role of women in religious politics, or to indict Islam as a gender-oppressive (hence “backward”) religion? Such analyses can entirely miss the ways in which women/gender can serve as a lens into understanding a number of aspects around the politicization of all religions.

By focusing only on women in Islam, political scientists suggest either that there is something about Islam that is particularly corrosive of gender equality or that there is something about Arab culture that is problematic (Donno and Russett 2004). The Indian case can serve as a useful reminder that poverty is the biggest threat to most women, not their religious practices. India’s shocking maternal mortality rates, the missing millions of girl babies, and practices of seclusion and veiling cross-religious boundaries in India and are most harshly experienced by women who don’t have access to alternative livelihoods. Looking at gender beyond Islam is a needed corrective to the politically driven myopia of much of the literature on women and religion as it currently stands.

Through the lens of gender: women in Hindu nationalism

Joan Scott proposed that gender should be used as a category of analysis in order to reveal the operation of social power (1986). That is, when we see gender differentiation we know that discourse is operating in order to benefit some and disadvantage others. In that way, we suggest that paying close attention to the role of women in Hindu nationalist politics reveals the inner workings of that movement. Examining the role of women is particularly fruitful precisely because women’s participation in conservative/religious politics is taken as counterintuitive and in need of explanation: The reasons why women would participate in Hindu nationalist politics are not immediately obvious if the ideology of Hindu nationalism is patriarchal and does not offer clear rewards to women. This puzzle motivating the literature on women in Hindu nationalism has the great virtue of leading us to the question of why not just women but anyone would participate in such a movement, thus drawing our attention to the work that goes into mobilizing support for Hindu nationalist politics.

The BJP’s initial rise to power in the 1980s–1990s produced a significant and path-breaking literature on women and gender in Hindu nationalism in India. This scholarship
traced the rise to power of the contemporary BJP through a gendered lens (A. Basu 1993a,b; Sarkar and Butalia 1995; Sarkar 2001). One author has argued that the extent of women’s participation in militant Hindu nationalist politics may be overstated (Menon 2003), but the broad consensus has been that the contemporary BJP rose to power by manipulating gendered discourses and issues of women’s rights, and mobilizing women in a wide range of activities—up to and including the instigation of violence against minority communities.

Yet the literature on women and gender in Hindu nationalism in India has not impacted (or been impacted by) the religion and politics literature more broadly, and instead has been driven over time by two persistent questions: Why do women participate in this movement? What, if any, is the potential for women to be empowered through such participation? An underlying affect of surprise and disbelief that women could or would participate in the hate-filled politics of Hindu nationalism is palpable throughout this early wave of literature. The phenomenon seemed at once new and inexplicable: “the recent and very sizable entry of [Hindu nationalist] women in violent campaigns, the leading roles of right-wing women in public politics is a new phenomenon that requires some explanation” (Sarkar 1998: 102).

Scholars frankly admitted that despite long experience in the field, they had not “encountered women’s complicity in violence, let alone violence against minorities” (Jeffery and Basu 1998, ix; see also Butalia 2001). And they found that answers to their questions—why would women participate in a movement like Hindu nationalism, and does such participation hold the potential for empowering women?—were not found in the extant “scholarly literature on women, religion, politics” (Jeffery and Basu 1998, x). This extant literature was more concerned with exegesis of theological texts and analysis of religious traditions rather than women’s lived experience.

The literature on women in Hindu nationalism grew out of a set of assumptions within feminism about what women’s interests are and how they are best realized. Feminist assumptions about the “peaceful nature” of women played a role in shaping the continuing surprise over women’s enthusiastic participation in Hindu nationalist politics from the 1990s onwards. Assumptions about how women get empowered and how women’s private piety is not (or should not be) related to public politics seem to have been critical in driving this literature.

Saba Mahmood (2005) has argued that feminism has adopted a normative model of freedom that assumes that women only exercise agency insofar as they subvert or resist patriarchy and patriarchal religion. Her investigation of women’s religious networks in Egypt leads her to reject this hidden assumption. Instead she argues that we must understand women’s lives in terms of the ethics and teleology they have adopted. In examining Muslim women’s participation in networks that are religious, conservative, and antagonistic towards liberal politics, some scholars have found that understanding these women’s actions requires rethinking their own feminist assumptions (Jamal 2005). They argue that one has to reject the rigid bifurcation of religion into the private sphere and feminism into the secular sphere.

There is a long feminist tradition of critically examining the ways in which patriarchy has been supported by religious institutions and ideologies. This scholarly and activist tradition is being called into question by some feminist scholars as part of a larger shift away from liberal feminism towards post-secular feminism. Post-secular thought was first made famous by Jurgen Habermas, who acknowledged his own blind spot in treating religious discourse as inherently irrational and therefore irrelevant to democratic discussion. Instead, he argued that religion offers a form of meaning-making to most humans and should be welcomed into public discourse (2008). Post-secular feminism in particular is concerned with how to
account for the religious experiences and beliefs of women; and it is increasingly critical of the liberal foundations of much feminist thought (Deo 2016).

From a traditional or liberal feminist perspective the question is why do women work against their own liberation? But from the perspective of Hindu nationalist women that question looks patronizing. There are many reasons Indian women may participate in Hindu nationalist politics; many of these reasons apply to Indian men too. The affective and religious rewards of participation are difficult to study but do more to hold together activist networks than shared ideological fervor (Wood 2003; Munson 2008).

Conclusion

The remarkable results of the 2014 election point up the urgent scholarly and political need for comparative political science to engage the case of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism in India’s democracy. In power for two years at the time of this writing, the BJP is already presiding over a climate of violent attacks on Christian churches, on minorities and lower castes, on the eating or storing of beef, and on public displays of affection, stifling critical speech on university campuses and undermining academic integrity. It is imperative as concerned scholars that we understand what strategies at different inflection points in time can bring a movement of politicized religion like Hindu nationalism to power—and thus what strategies can be deployed to disempower them as well. While there are never any “surefire” ways to combat the politicization of religion, recognizing and understanding the interaction between contingency and strategy opens up the possibility of countermeasures.

The general comparative literature on religion and politics has not developed to a point where it can offer guidance on such questions. First, it has been overly focused on the Abrahamic religions and driven by a problematic concern (obsession?) with the issue of women in Islam. We seek to correct this imbalance through an interpretive and historical approach that traces the setbacks and advances of Hindu nationalist politics through a gendered lens. Second, prior scholarship focusing on Hindutva women has been underpinned by secular-liberal feminist principles that may impede the possibility of understanding Hindu nationalist women—and Hindu nationalist politics—in or on their own terms.

Our findings suggest the need for scholars of religion and politics to denaturalize any presumed linkages between religiosity and political activism based in/on religion: The politicization of religion is not an automatic or naturally occurring process. Rather, it is one that must be constructed. By focusing on Hindu nationalism’s uneven record of political success and its uneven incorporation of women into the movement, we are able to demonstrate the contingent and constructed path by which religion is transformed into politicized religion mobilized for electoral gain. In this way Hinduism as a religion may have little or no impact on the functioning of democracy. But Hindu nationalism as politicized religion can carry the potential to manipulate, threaten, and even transform democracy—which is why it is so important to pay critical scholarly attention to the contingent and constructed ways in which religion becomes politicized. Our use of gender—including both how women are unevenly incorporated into the movement and how they are active in resistance to it—is particularly productive as a critical interpretive lens to understand the evolution of Hindu nationalist politics and denaturalize the link between religion and politicized religion.

We believe our study of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism in Indian democracy can offer significant insights into the relationship between religion, politics, and politicized religion in many other contexts within Asia and beyond. We hope our contributions will lead other scholars to reexamine, for example, how Islamic piety can become or fails to become...
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politicized Islamism. In particular, a study of the ways in which politicized Islam, or Islamist groups, incorporate or fail to incorporate women—as well as the forms of resistance to such movements manifested by women—would be especially productive and would circumvent the difficulties of current overly normative (not in a good way) and imperialistic approaches to this question. Simply undermining the assumption that religion itself is a powerful, uncontrollable, and destructive political force is a first step in mitigating the power that politicized religion can deploy. The hard work of politicizing religion can in the end only be countered by the hard work of understanding how religion gets politicized and how to resist its politicization.

Notes

1 In first-past-the-post electoral systems (also called plurality systems), a constituency elects one representative out of a pool that could include multiple candidates. If there are more than two candidates running, the winning candidate may win with less than a majority of votes. That is, instead of requiring a winner who has 50 + 1% of the vote, in a first-past-the-post system the candidate only needs more than the others, or a plurality of votes.
2 Abrahamic religions share a belief in a monotheistic deity whose disciple, Abraham, features in the origin stories of the followers as a man whose faith is directly tested by God, who asks him to sacrifice his son as a show of devotion.
3 Speech in Hyderabad. Quoted in Hindu Outlook II:5 (30 March 1938), 4.
4 The literature on both these campaigns is vast. For a start see Williams 2012; Pathak and Sunder Rajan 1989; Liberhan Ayodhya Commission 2009; Gopal 1991.
6 The embrace of the Black Madonna by Italian Catholics versus the doctrine of Mary by the Vatican is one example; an example in South Asia is the embrace of Sufi shrines by Hindus and Muslims along with the disapproval of them by Muslim ulema.

References


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