

Book Review

Hindutva as Political Monotheism

Basu, A. (2020). *Hindutva as political monotheism*. Duke University Press.

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An ideology once on the fringe of India's political cognition, Hindutva has recently garnered renewed attention for its success in Indian electoral politics, evolving transnational reach and ongoing saffronization of civic institutions and liberties. Anustup Basu's monograph, *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* (henceforth *HPM*), presents a hitherto underutilized lens of analysis. The book extends the works of political theorist Carl Schmitt on the monotheistic imperative found in the European theorizations of religious and ethnocentric nationhood, to India's history with ethnonationalism. According to Schmitt, "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (p. 4). By connecting this Schmittian notion of political theology with other traditional concepts of Hindu sovereignty and nationhood, Basu argues that politics, which is characterized by a religious motive, must be inherently monotheistic. Accordingly, for Hindutva's dream of a majoritarian "Hindu India" to exist as an unfederated whole, it would require a normative version of Indian monotheism that is Hindu. Therefore, Basu's investigation of Hindutva situates its genesis as "a monotheme of religiosity rather than religion itself," one that sought "ethnocultural consistency rather than a theological unity" (p. 5). To that end, *HPM* presents two key aspects of relevance: 1) the colonial roots of "Hinduism" as a racialized religious category, modernity's landscape in India, and the drafting and implementation of the constitution in postcolonial India; and 2) the rise of Hindutva amid other reactionary ethnonationalist uprisings in the face of liberalism's crisis globally. Within this context, Basu traces the quest to develop a monotheistic Hindu politic as a literary and culturalist project during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and suggests its progression today into a techno-urban advertised brand, which has often been termed as "Hindutva 2.0."

In *HPM*, Basu refrains from offering a chronologically linear narration of how core notions of Hindutva were/are conceptualized, but rather claims to showcase his "speculation" on the topic by drawing from a myriad of sources to contribute to the investigation of Hindutva's monotheistic temperament. Chapter One, "Questions Concerning the Hindu Political," introduces and elaborates on the key theoretical concepts from Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (2007) and *Political Theology* (2006). Here, Basu suggests further study of the

Schmittian notion of the political as a “mythopoetic automaton” (p. 12), which dictates the conditions of belonging to a unified sense of peopleness and controls its imagination to recognize its monotheistic passion toward the nation and the state and to enable antagonism toward those outside such an axiom. This translates to rivalry with other monotheistic axiomatics like Christianity and to a greater extent, owing to historical events, Islam and their subsequent otherization from the desired Hindu Volk. This implication is quite relevant when addressing Islamophobia in India, which acquired a flavor beyond (mere) xenophobia, but one of deep political jealousy toward its monotheistic unity.

In Chapter Two, “The Hindu Nation as an Organism,” Hindutva’s political jealousy is elaborated on in Basu’s analysis of incongruent “pieties” of Hindutva discourse of spirituality and law, race and caste, history, language, culture, and identity, where he outlines the problems that complicated the efforts of ideologues such as M. S. Gowalkar, V. D. Savrakar, Deen Dayal Upadhyay to mold the nationhood of India into a Hindu organismic whole. By juxtaposing philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal’s scholarship on Indic “little traditions” with Hindutva’s devised “grand” tradition, Basu illustrates how Hindutva attempts to absorb the plurality of vernacular renditions of myths and epics featuring local holy sites and deities into its monolith, in its search for a singular story of origin and identity that is expressed in amnesiac terms of loss of belonging. In that regard, Hindutva seeks a Hindu nation whose ideal Hindu subject is imagined to be embodying both ancient and modern values simultaneously, who will navigate issues pertaining to state sovereignty by being steadfast and loyal to the upper caste category of Savarna leadership and wisdom. This implies upholding and legitimizing caste hierarchies as a form of spiritual as well as political submission.

The discussion in Chapter Three, “The Indian Monotheism,” shifts to the secular but Hinduized foundation of India as a postcolonial nation state. The discursive traditions of Hindu reform, Hindu anthropology, jurisprudence, and history during are explored within the nineteenth-century Indological signification of “Hinduism” as a category. Here, a “constellation of moments” (p. 146) that eventually shaped postcolonial India’s relationship with Hindutva is highlighted: Raja Rammohan Roy’s Vedantic, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s literary exposition, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s universalization of the pending question of caste, and M. K. Gandhi’s the “pacific paternalism” (p. 146). Basu identifies these moments to have been vital to the construction of a monothematic nation-state, given that their privileged agencies furnished the invention of a Hindu past during their determination of its future. The consequences of such a discursive project resonate till this day from institutional practices to media ecologies.

The fourth and final chapter, “Hindutva 2.0 as Advertised Monotheism,” discusses the recent occurrence of Hindutva’s meteoric influence in the arena of globalization, information, and technology, aka Hindutva 2.0. Basu contends that a novel synergy has been established between “being Hindu and neoliberalism, one taking place on a plane of marketable desires and terrors” (p. 158). This is in the context of the ecology of what Basu has stated as, “advertised modernization,” wherein majoritarian narratives rely on affective neuropolitics of “multidirectional stimulations, attention spans, diversions, ennui, or boredom become potent political factors” (p. 180). A global instance of this ecology is the Trumpian lie (of Donald Trump), a discursive tactic shared by Narendra Modi, which does not oblige such majoritarian leaders to present the truth but mutilated versions of it to their followers. Figures such as Trump and Modi are also products of advertised modernization, where they are the brand that sells the ideology and not espoused, vice-versa. When compared with previous modes of information dissemination of Hindutva ideology, such as print media like the Gita Press, Hindutva 2.0 relies on much more efficient routes that are difficult to control once engaged in, such as social media platforms and, most importantly, in the fantastical machinations of Bollywood. Basu highlights the key role Bollywood plays, in the era of neo-liberalization and techno-financial boom, in perpetuating anxieties of globalization while portraying mitigative solutions through the maintenance of an urban normative, “caste-class patriarchal status quo” (p. 192).

Basu’s *HPM* presents its significance beyond Bharatiya Janata Party or Narendra Modi’s right-wing governance or Islamophobia and is relevant across various fields of enquiry into majoritarianism in democracies, both locally and globally. However, there is one aspect that I think could warrant inclusion in this monograph: the histories of southern and northeastern India’s variants of Hindutva, the repeated cultivation of its ideology despite failures and civil unrest, especially in states like Assam and Tamil Nadu. *HPM* does an excellent job of tracing its origins but when discussing Hindutva’s present and future, it would be remiss not to include those regions whose resistance to Hindutva has contributed to its reshaping over the past decades. Hindutva 2.0 cannot merely be the product of North Indian sociopolitical characteristics but also involves unique geographical histories, politics, economies, and cultural literary moments. A deeper analysis of Hindutva’s reach in regions beyond its bastion, like Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra, is required to contribute to our evolving conceptualization of Hindutva and where it is headed. Trends of Islamophobia are also dependent on such contexts, therefore it is equally important to consider the ramifications of Hindutva’s political jealousy toward Abrahamic faiths in the subcontinent, its borrowing of their theological compendia toward unconstitutional political ends such as the recent issue of implementing the

National Register of Citizen that aimed to eliminate “foreigners” from India while promising to offer asylum to Hindu refugees. At the risk of being pessimistic, there seems to be no obstruction in Hindutva machines, and its growth today will not be threatened even if their political parties suffer electoral losses. Their proliferation can be attributed to the robust civil society organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the greater Sangh Parivar’s activities, which is only briefly addressed in specifics in *Hindutva as Political Monotheism*.