

ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN Hinduism and Hindutva

By Arvind Sharma

I
Hinduism is the name given to the most ancient and persistent religion on the Indian subcontinent, and Hindutva is the name by which the ideology of the Hindu right, represented by the political party Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People's Party (BJP), is known. It is also the ideology of the cultural body known as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or National Volunteer Core (RSS), which was founded in 1925 and with which the BJP has strong links. Ever since the rise of the BJP on the Indian political scene from 1990 onward, and its recent successes in national elections in India in 2014 and 2019, the question of the relationship between Hinduism as a religion and Hindutva as a political ideology has come to the fore, because the word "Hindu" is common to both.¹ The exploration of the relationship between Hinduism as a religion and Hindutva as a political philosophy has become a virtual academic cottage industry that shows no signs of slowing down.² In popular writings on the subject, Hindutva has been variously described as "Hinduism on steroids," as "Hinduism which resists," or as "an illegitimate child of Hinduism." A preliminary way of understanding the difference between Hinduism and Hindutva would be to recognise that Hinduism is a religion (however defined) while Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, is a political ideology, whose relation to the religion of Hinduism could be considered analogous to the relationship between Christianity and Christian fundamentalism or Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. There is, however, one key difference. Hinduism is a plural tradition, as compared to Christianity and Islam which possess well defined universal creedal formulations that are largely absent in Hinduism according to most observers. Therefore, Hindu "fundamentalism" is remarkably thin in terms of religious content as compared to Christianity and Islam. What follows is an attempt to analyze the differences between Hinduism and Hindutva by identifying the points that separate or divide them.

II
Several distinctions are at play in this debate. An understanding of these distinctions and their historical background will go a long way toward helping us gain and maintain a grip on the issues involved. We might identify the first divide by recognizing the distinction between religion and culture as it operates in this debate, especially as it may hold the key to understanding the seminal text of Hindutva, namely *Hindutva* (1923) by V. D. Savarkar.³

One is normally inclined to treat Hinduism as a religion of India, an ancient tradition that does not distinguish between religion and culture, and is just one of the religions found in India that has coexisted with many others such as Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A crucial move that Hindutva thinkers make is to draw a distinction between those religions that have their origin in India—such as Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism—and Christianity and Islam, which indeed have followers in India, but did not originate there.

The first four religions mentioned above will henceforth be referred to as Indic religions to distinguish them from Christianity and Islam. The need to distinguish the Indic religions from other religions in India lies in the impact made by the introduction of the Western term *religion* in the census operations carried out by the British in India, especially from 1871 onward. In these decennial or decadal censuses, the participants were asked to indicate their religious affiliation largely on the British assumption that one could only belong to one religion at a time. Some Indians began to feel over the years that this was having the effect of compartmentalizing what we

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might call the Indic religious tradition into four separate "religions." The key fact to keep in mind here is that the Indian followers of these four members of the Indic religious tradition did not treat their own relationship to these traditions necessarily in exclusive terms prior to the British intervention. In the Western conception of religion, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim had to be considered members of different religions (despite the fact that they worship one and the same God), whereas in the Indian conception of religious life, one could be a member of more than one tradition at the same time. Modern Nepalese, for instance, freely describe themselves as both Hindu and Buddhist, as they lay outside British jurisdiction.⁴

This dual or multiple religious identity that prevailed within the Indic religious tradition as a whole was in danger of being subverted as a result of the census operation. While the British were in power in India, Indians who felt differently were not in the position to challenge this disturbing trend directly. They therefore tried to counter it ideologically by using the distinction between religion and culture as drawn in the West to their advantage. The word "Hindutva" was coined to refer to "Hinduism" not as a religion but as a culture. Thus, the Hindutva spokespersons claimed that although these four religions were four different religions according to the British census, all four of them share a common culture. What the word "religion" had divided, the word "culture" united. The four religions shared in common the ideas of *karma* and *dharma*, veneration of the cow, and so on, and their holy places of worship were within India, unlike those of Christianity and Islam, which were outside the Indian subcontinent. The name "Hindutva" was given to this uniting culture, which was shared by all those for whom India was the land of *both their birth and the birth of their religion*.

This development provides an interesting example of the interface between two civilizations. The concept of religion as it prevailed in the West was tied to a singular religious identity, whereas in India dual or multiple identity was the norm. The introduction of the word "religion" by the British in India—with its connotation of "exclusive" religious identity—began, therefore, to change the contours of religious life in India, and the word "Hindutva" was arguably coined as a centripetal force to counter the centrifugal forces released by introducing the Western concept of religion into India.

The close relationship of these two concepts of Hinduism and Hindutva may help us account for the paradox that those Indians, usually liberals, who stand by Hinduism (rather than Hindutva) regard Hindutva or political Hinduism as a subset that falls within the larger set of Hinduism. Followers of Hindutva, on the other hand, prefer to see Hinduism as a subset of Hindutva (rather than the other way around) in the sense that a culture may contain many dimensions, including the religious, within it. Briefly, for the liberals, Hinduism comes first and then Hindutva. For the Hindu nationalists, Hindutva comes first and then Hinduism.

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Hindu liberals take a milder view of Muslim rule over India and a more severe view of the period of British rule, while Hindutva historians take a more severe view of Muslim rule over India and a milder view of British rule.

III

Another distinction to keep in mind in this context is between two versions of Indian history: secular and religious. Believers in Hinduism tend to root for the secular version. According to the secular interpretation of Indian history, the idea of India is essentially territorial. There is a geographical area called India, and all those who live within that territory are Indians. In fact, they are Indian citizens because the concept of citizenship is territorial: anybody born within the territory of India is an Indian. This is a primary building block of this view. From this, it follows that all Indians—irrespective of the religion to which they belong—are Indians who qualitatively contribute *equally* to the religious life of India. The fact that the holy lands of some of the religions, which they happen to follow, lie outside India is trumped by the fact that they themselves are born in India and are its citizens. The implication is that modern India as we know it, then, has been built equally by all its citizens, and its future belongs equally to all of them.

This is the modern, secular, liberal vision of India enshrined in the Indian Constitution, which was originally drafted in English as a further tribute to its modernity. This vision was also shared by the leaders of the freedom movement in India, which lends it further credence. This is the version of Indian history subscribed to by most of those Indians who stand by Hinduism (rather than Hindutva).

The alternative vision of India points out that the moment of Indian Independence was also the moment of Partition of British India into India and Pakistan, with the latter country being formed explicitly as the homeland of India's Muslims. This would seem to imply that the division of the subcontinent was between a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. But this implication was rejected on the Indian side. The usual response from the liberal side to this implication is that the distinction between India and Pakistan was *not* between Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India *but* between a theocratic Pakistan and a secular India.

For a long time, this argument prevailed, but the subsequent history of modern India seemed to follow a course that can only be described as characterized by asymmetrical secularism, in the course of which the interests of the Hindu majority were felt to have been compromised.

It is this secular erosion of Indian polity that is often held responsible for the rise of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism. Ironically, the Hindu right also accepts the idea of secularism in the sense of separation of church and state as a legitimate aspiration, and therefore dubbed the secularism as practiced by the Indian National Congress—India's dominant party until recently, which swears by secularism—as pseudosecularism.

According to this account of Indian history favored by the Hindutva school, the Hindus are the original inhabitants of this land, where they developed a great civilization in the past. Unfortunately, they subsequently came under first Muslim and then Christian foreign rule from about 1200 until 1947. These two regimes were hostile to Hinduism, which somehow managed to survive this dark period of its history.

The achievement of Independence by India was a game changer. Perhaps for the first time in Indian history, 95 percent of all Hindus in the world now live under a single central government in India. But the situation is complicated by the presence of sizable minorities. It is worth noting the history of the West is usually one of a majority dominating a minority, while the history of India is one in which minorities (first Muslims and then Christians) have dominated the majority (Hindu) for centuries. This Hindutva version of Indian history implies that the time has come for Hindus to assert themselves politically after centuries of first Islamic and Christian, and now secular, oppression. This self-assertion is bound to be political in nature because their subjugation was also political. The followers of other religions in India also have their proper place in India because Hinduism is a plural and tolerant religion that provides ample scope for them to flourish peacefully alongside Hinduism, although the righting of historical wrongs at the hands of Muslims and Christians has to be addressed. The Indian National Congress offered India the (diluted) Hinduism of secularism; Hindutva offers India the secularism of Hinduism.

The secular and Hindu nationalist versions of Indian history differ in their understanding of its *telos*, with adherents of Hinduism rather than Hindutva veering toward the secular version and the adherents of Hindutva veering toward the Hindu nationalist version.

IV

Another distinction between the adherents of Hinduism and those of Hindutva also pertains to the interpretation of Indian history and has to do with the nature of Islamic and British rule over India. Hindu liberals regard the Muslims who ruled over India and the British who ruled over India on a different footing. They argue that during the long presence of Muslims in India, they had become Indians by virtue of their residence, and therefore the struggle for Independence against the British was a struggle both of them engaged in together. The dark period of Indian history consists of only British rule over India, during which both Hindus and Muslims were mercilessly exploited. Historians of the Hindutva school, however, see the situation differently. According to them, the real struggle on the Indian subcontinent was and continues to be the struggle between Hinduism and Islam for the possession of the subcontinent. The 200-year British rule over India is viewed merely as an interlude in this 1,000-year-old struggle. In fact, the Hindutva school is even inclined to view British rule over India somewhat favorably as compared to Muslim rule. In other words, Hindu liberals take a milder view of Muslim rule over India and a more severe view of the period of British rule, while Hindutva historians take a more severe view of Muslim rule over India and a milder view of British rule.

V

Another point on which Hindu liberals and Hindu nationalists differ is on the assessment of Mahatma Gandhi's (1869–1948) place in history. Hindu liberals, as well as Indian liberals more generally, glorify the achievement of Independence by India under the leadership of Gandhi by nonviolent means as a unique event in human history and therefore hold Gandhi in high esteem, an esteem shared by many in India and the world. Many Hindu nationalists, however, focus not on the Independence of India but on the Partition of India, and they regard Gandhi's attitude toward the Muslims of India, which they dub as appeasement, responsible for it. They are particularly bitter that Gandhi continued this attitude even after the country had been partitioned and went on a fast to compel the now-independent government of India to release funds to Pakistan, even when the two countries were at war in Kashmir. The assassin of Gandhi, Nathuram Godse (1910–1949), specifically mentioned this as the factor that drove him to kill Gandhi. Many Hindu nationalists tend to exonerate him of his crime, and some even revere him. Indian liberals regularly highlight this fact, that the sympathies of the Hindu right lie with Godse rather than Gandhi.

The fact that the political Independence of India is attributed by many to the nonviolent movement led by Gandhi from around 1920 onward may create the impression that Hinduism is essentially a pacifist tradition. This is

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Mahatma Gandhi and Nathuram Godse. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/vaeoxno> and <https://tinyurl.com/wkzcn5g>.

also supported by the fact that Hinduism usually comes across as a religion more concerned with piety than power. This version of events is questioned by the Hindutva school in two ways. First of all, they accuse liberal historiography of downplaying the role of the revolutionary movement in India, which advocated armed resistance to dislodge the British prior to the rise of Gandhi around 1920. Moreover, they also accuse liberal historiography of downplaying the role of Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) in the achievement of Indian Independence. Bose was a remarkable leader who was even elected as a president of the Indian National Congress, which was led by Gandhi. Bose made common cause with Germany and Japan to defeat the British. During World War II, he formed the Indian National Army (INA) from Indian soldiers of the British Army who had surrendered to Japan. This INA even engaged the British Army in combat in Assam. Hindutva historians ascribe the retreat of the British from India in 1947 to the threat posed by the formation of the INA by Bose. Once the INA was formed, the ghost of the Sepoy Mutiny once again began to stalk the British dream of an Indian empire. After its formation, the British could not trust the loyalty of Indian soldiers in the British army, on which the British control of India ultimately depended. Hindutva historians regard the view that the British left because of Gandhi's nonviolent tactics as politically naïve.

This militant tradition is also seen by Hindutva historians as a continuation of the militant tradition found in Hinduism in former times. Hindutva historians prefer to see the entire rule of Muslims over India as a period of constant *Hindu resistance* to Muslim rule. Liberal historians dwell on the figures of Akbar (1542–1605) and Aurangzeb (1618–1707) during the period of Moghul rule over India from 1526 to 1858, while Hindutva historians dwell on the determined resistance during the rule of these Moghul emperors by Maharana Pratap (1540–1597) and Shivaji (d. 1680). The same holds true of the period of the Delhi Sultanate (ca. 1200 to 1526), during which there was fierce Rajput resistance to the establishment of Muslim rule over India.

VI

Caste is a complex subject, but it also figures in the discourse on the differences between Hinduism and Hindutva. The liberal historians emphasize

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the discriminatory aspects of caste and also tend to see it as a negative factor in the context of economic development. The Hindutva historians, while often deploring the discriminatory aspects of the caste system, also see it as a form of cellular social defense against the civilizational challenge posed by Muslim rule, which liberal historians tend to see largely in political and economic terms. The liberal historians also generally favor a Marxist analysis of the situation, which tends to downplay religious differences. Hindutva ideologues also raise an interesting but different question in the context of economic development. The magisterial work of economic historian Angus Maddison (1926–2010) has established that India led the world in the share of global output from the beginning of the Christian era until 1500.⁵ It lost out to China in 1600 but regained its position in 1700. Soon after, the British gained control of India, and by the time the British left in 1947, India's share of global output was among the lowest. Conventional wisdom considers the caste system as the dominant form of social organization in India from the beginning of the Christian era until today and argues that it was under British rule that its hold was probably weakened because of the policies of the

British government. If one continues to look upon the caste system as something baneful, then how does one reconcile such an assessment with the fact that, while the system was supposed to be dominant, India was one of the most productive countries in the world, while during British rule, when the hold of the caste system was reportedly weakened, the global share of India in output declined sharply?

In this context, the political role of the caste system also needs to be examined. When the Hindutva movement was in its early stages, its leadership was often criticized for being dominated by *brahmins*, especially from Maharashtra. Over the years, however, its leadership has changed, and its two primary figures in politics currently, namely Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Party President Amit Shah, are both non-brahmins: Modi actually comes from a caste classified just above the former untouchables. This provides an interesting contrast to the caste composition of Hindu liberals who, although they routinely deplore the caste system, mostly come from the upper castes.

Another issue on which Hindu liberals and followers of Hindutva differ is the cow issue. The very issue embarrasses Hindu liberals, who find it quite illiberal to bring up such a “communal” issue as a ban on beef eating. The followers of Hindutva, however, treat the matter very seriously, especially in those parts of India known irreverently as the cow belt: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, and perhaps also Haryana. It remains a deeply emotional issue for Hindutva, which leaves the Hindu liberals cold.

There is then the issue of language. English continues to be the dominant language in India, although only about 12 percent of the population seems to use it. But the attitude of Hindi liberals and Hindu nationalists toward it differs. Hindu liberals consider it a positive factor in national life. They see it as a language that keeps India united and as an asset in an increasingly globalizing world in which science, technology, and international commerce play such a crucial role. Hindu nationalists may accept some of these arguments but basically feel that the dominance of English in public

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857



The Capture of the Cashmere Gate, Sept. 14, 1857, a steel engraving, London Printing and Publishing Company, c. 1858. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/upulq6k>.

The Sepoy Mutiny was a violent and very bloody uprising against British rule in India in 1857. It is also known by other names: the Indian Mutiny, the Indian Rebellion of 1857, or the Indian Revolt of 1857.

On March 29, 1857, on the parade ground at Barrackpore, a sepoym named Mangal Pandey fired the first shot of the uprising. His unit in the Bengal Army, which had refused to use the new rifle cartridges,

was about to be disarmed and punished. The cartridges were said to be greased with cow and pig fat which was offensive to both Hindus and Muslims. Pandey rebelled by shooting a British sergeant-major and a lieutenant. In the altercation, Pandey was surrounded by British troops and shot himself in the chest. He survived and was put on trial and hanged on April 8, 1857.

Prior to the mutiny, the British increasingly used a variety of tactics to usurp control of the Indian princely states that were under what were called subsidiary alliances with the British. One notable British technique was called the doctrine of lapse, which involved the British prohibiting an Indian ruler without a natural heir from adopting a successor and, after the ruler died or abdicated, annexing his land. Another serious concern was the increasing pace of Westernization, by which Indian society was being affected by the introduction of Western ideas such as Christianity. There was a widespread belief that the British aimed to convert India to Christianity. The introduction of Western methods of education was also a direct challenge to orthodoxy, both Hindu and Muslim.

In Britain and in the West, it was almost always portrayed as a series of unreasonable and bloodthirsty uprisings spurred by falsehoods about religious insensitivity. In India, it has been viewed quite differently. The events of 1857 have been considered the first outbreak of an independence movement against British rule.

Sources: “Indian Mutiny,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4yfhq2x>; “The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857,” *ThoughtCo*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y5eyoqqh>.

life is unjustified, and its role, at least in public life, must be replaced by Indian languages. The situation is complicated by the fact that India has twenty-two recognized regional languages, and although Hindi is spoken by just under half the country and widely understood in the rest, there has been fierce resistance to its “imposition” in the south of India. So the status quo, as it was at the time of Independence, continues to prevail. For Indian liberals, it is by and large a matter of celebration, while for the Hindu nationalists, it is a matter of sufferance. The difference in their attitudes may be described as follows: Indian liberals tend to regard someone who does not know English in India as undereducated, while Hindu nationalists regard an Indian in India who knows only English as undereducated.

VII

This list of differences is not exhaustive but rather illustrative. The two streams of thought also differ on their assessment of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru; on some aspects of the Constitution of India; on the nature of Indian secularism; on the appropriate economic policy for India; and religious conversion. I hope, however, that this essay suffices to convey a sense of the nature of the differences between those who take their stand on Hinduism and those who take their stand on Hindutva.

The broader context in which these differences occur is that of India's interaction with the West, the dominant modern civilization from the sixteenth century onward globally. When two unevenly matched civilizations interact, the civilization at the receiving end (in this case, Indian as opposed to the dominant West) has basically three options: outright rejection, selective appropriation, and outright acceptance. Both Indian liberals and Hindu nationalists dismiss outright rejection and outright acceptance as viable options, and believe in selective appropriation. The difference between them is regarding the nature of the mix in which the Hindu nationalists want a greater measure of the “Hindu” element compared to the Indian liberals.⁶ According to the Hindu nationalists, this should be so because the Hindu civilization has been an enduring one, and the Hindu religion is subscribed to by close to 80 percent of the population of India. Hindu and Indian liberals fear that this attempt to enlarge the Hindu footprint in India may seriously upset the delicate equilibrium, prevailing in a multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual country like India. ■

NOTES

1. See Arvind Sharma, “On Hindu, Hindustan, Hinduism and Hindutva,” *Numen* 49, no. 1 (2002): 1–36.
2. Jaithirth Rao, *The Indian Conservative: A History of Indian Right-Wing Thought* (New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2019); Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018); *The Hindu Way: An Introduction to Hinduism* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2019); Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2019); Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India* (London: C. Hurst and Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019); A.P. Chatterji, T. Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, eds., *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2019); and Swapan Dasgupta, *Awakening Bharat Mata: The Political Beliefs of the Indian Right* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2019); etc.
3. V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva* (New Delhi: Hindu Sahitya Sadan, 1923).
4. Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.
5. Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy, 1–2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
6. See Arvind Sharma, “On Hindu, Hindustan, Hinduism and Hindutva,” *Numen* 49, no. 1 (2002): 1–36.

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