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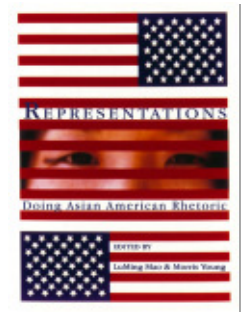
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LEARNING AUTHENTICITY

Pedagogies of Hindu Nationalism in North America

Subhasree Chakravarty

For the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangha (HSS)¹ in North America, it is especially important to represent a unified Indian national experience that can be easily conveyed to a diasporic audience. In recent years, therefore, the HSS has undertaken a rigorous method of disseminating knowledge on Hindu history, society, and culture within its target groups through various forms of pedagogic practices ranging from regularly organized educational camps to meetings to publications of instructional books and pamphlets. As a continuation of this endeavor to spread knowledge of Hinduism, the HSS and affiliated organizations have now undertaken projects like the so-called California Hindu textbook controversy to ensure strict vigilance over all written materials published on Hinduism in North America. Through all this, the HSS proposes to transmit messages to awaken Hindus across the world to a realization of their current social and cultural predicament. In keeping with these sentiments, the HSS in its mission statement proclaims Hindu Jage Vishwa Jage—in the awakening of the Hindus, the world will awaken.

In my reading of the HSS texts, including pedagogic documents, pamphlets, brochures, and other print materials obtained from Web sites and various chapter offices, it has become increasingly evident that in the revival and proliferation of education on Hinduism, the HSS attempts to stimulate and reorient a certain restrictive Hindu religiopolitical sentiment for its specific diasporic audience. These attempts, I argue, can be seen as strategies on the part of the HSS to instill what I shall call here “exclusivist rhetoric.” This policy, implemented through rhetorical constructions of legends concerning Hindu Indian cultural heritage, practices, signs, symbols, and images, as we

1. Roughly translated as Hindu Volunteer Corps and commonly known as the HSS.

shall examine here, eventually paves the way for mobilizing religious sentiments through cultural interpretations. The exclusivist rhetoric, therefore, successfully weaves narratives of Indian pride and supremacy directed especially at the young members of these organizations, who have not had a chance to be adequately informed about the “true” qualities of being Indian—a concept largely circulated among Hindu educational groups. The four major organizations whose contributions in promoting and educating the Hindu masses in North America have been most noteworthy are the Educator’s Society for the Heritage of India (ESHI), the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), the Vedic Foundation (VF) and the HSS. Looking into the mission statements and activity reports of each of these organizations, one cannot fail to see that the current generation of Hindu Indian Americans are persistently being misled about their cultural heritage through multiple educational sources. In fact, the ESHI claims its position by asserting that “our children are the future and we do not want them to grow with embarrassment learning wrong things and lose pride. Hindu parents and the community leaders are very important since it’s our children and their future” (n.d.).

LEARNING, THE HINDU WAY

The crux of the problem lies in the way Hinduism is represented in school textbooks, college/university publications and books, all forms of media representations, including radio, television, the Web, and magazines, and in libraries and museums. All these mediums of transmission of knowledge on Hinduism are, according to the above-mentioned organizations, inconsistent in their depiction of Indian cultural values and consequently fail to encourage the second generation of Hindu American children to be inspired by them. To prevent this loss of pride in Indian traditions and culture among young Hindu Americans, these educational groups have drafted agreements that declare, “[T]here is a total disconnect between what we know of India and how it is presented. The stereotypes and negativity is a very embarrassing experience to our children to an extent that they want to dissociate. Embarrassment also leads to emotional stress within our families, enhances generation gap” (ESHI n.d.).

Furthermore, the pedagogic materials supplied by these organizations treat Indian culture and heritage as synonymous with Hindu religious teachings, failing to understand that Indian heritage is not just its

religious traditions. The ESHI asserts that it is both secular and religious at the same time. On one hand, it affirms its secularity and impartial position by stating that it “is an organization of academicians, professionals and other educators whose sole purpose is to help the world understand our heritage,” while, on the other hand, it claims solidarity with Hindu Indian “temples, sampradays [religious sects], ashrams [monasteries] and certain other Indic religious traditions—Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.” The duality embedded in these principles, that of dissemination of religious sentiments through secular modes, gains further prominence as organizations like the HSS, ESHI, HAF, and VF vow to provide a platform that would make “the right changes to re-establish the greatness of Hinduism, educate individuals about the divine history of India and the original teachings of Indian (Hindu) scriptures through logical, scientific, historical and scriptural evidences and to serve as an authoritative resource on authentic Hinduism” (ESHI n.d.). Establishing this “authentic Hinduism” thus develops as the main objective in educating a new generation of young Indian Hindu Americans whose pride and knowledge of their religious and cultural heritage could then successfully be used to counteract issues of multiculturalism and diasporic discontents in American classrooms and other social settings.

What is the form of this authentic Hinduism? How is it different from other interpretations of Hinduism? Since Hinduism does not provide a single authoritative scriptural text or a specific set of religious guidelines (as is the case with most other religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), it is the myriad of myths, legends, and philosophical doctrines that form the vast body of religious literature integrating a range of instructional measures. It also lends a certain flexibility to the structure of religious education, leaving it mostly to individual audience members to decide upon what values to derive from it. The adaptability of the multifarious narratives embedded in most Hindu religious texts to contemporary times makes it a highly popular pedagogic method among Hindus, especially because they mostly retain loose ends and questions regarding what could be called a quintessential Hindu religious life. It is this amorphous characteristic of Hindu religious education that makes it a fluid and widely followed body of instructions, at times devoid of dogmatic dicta. Within the diverse linguistic and social practices of India, these tales of the Hindu way of life then act as a cohesive force uniting the Hindu majority through shared religious beliefs and ethical principles that form the backbone of Hindu

religion and culture. Even now, in most everyday household practices in India, myths, epics, and other similar texts are communicated orally, chiefly through a tradition of storytelling, along with the enactment of religious rituals and customs that ensure their continuity through generations, many of them providing moral guidance to their audience. In a hierarchical social setting like conservative Hindu society, these stories are probably one of those rare elements of religious literature that are made readily available to all people regardless of class, caste, or gender. Perhaps it is this accessibility of Hindu religious literature, and its universal reception across the country, that also make it the best possible instrument of ideological inculcation. The core of these narrative strategies, which usually center on some moral predicament, compels compliance. And this might go a long way toward explaining the proliferation of similar chronicles, written with the persuasive techniques adopted by contemporary Hindu fundamentalist groups. As we shall see here, these contrived accounts of what Hinduism entails function explicitly at times and implicitly at others like a rhetorical edifice, through which convictions of *Hindutva*² are filtered and molded. In the following sections, I explore how this process of constructing stories about Hinduism has been incorporated within the North American Hindu educational organization ideology as part of its fundamentalist propaganda. The chronicles on Hinduism that the HSS, ESHI, HAF, and VF conjure are relatively rigid, focusing on epics that are considered supremely authoritative texts within the organizations. Although most of these stories are still transmitted orally, occasionally in informal settings, they are motivated by a singular agenda and repeated often to fulfill the goals of the organizations.

Accounts of Hindu religiocultural values that are disseminated by the HSS and VF include verbally constructed narratives as well as a conglomeration of visual images and practices. For the most part, these narratives comprise invigorating tales of religious nationalism. The models that

2. The term *Hindutva* was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar—the founder of the HSS/RSS (Rashtryia Swayamsevak Sangha; see below) group. The concept originally coincided with the concept of Hinduism, meaning people who followed Hindu religious principles. In his book *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* Savarkar first distinguished Hinduism from *Hindutva*, associating the former with an orientalist viewpoint and validating the need for a substitution of the suffix “ism” with the Sanskrit “va” to ensure that it embraces what he understands as racially pure terminology. Subsequently, members of the Hindu nationalist movement began identifying themselves as of *Hindutva* origin referring to the racial identity established by Savarkar.

are set up for emulation by young Hindu Americans alternate between the lives of Hindu mystics and those of Hindu rulers and their political struggles. The luminaries in turn alternate, rather arbitrarily, between real-life historical figures like Shivaji, Rana Pratap, and Vivekananda and mythical characters such as Krishna, Arjun, Ram, and Sita. Furthermore, the morals these works promote show a gendered division. Stories illuminating public-sphere virtues such as political courage, idealism, and honesty are directed at male audiences, while women are directed toward the traditional “feminine” virtues, such as loyalty to one’s husband, motherly love, patience, and similar qualities that are seen as indispensable within the domestic sphere of life. These narratives are then supplemented by the practice of yoga, meditation, and martial arts to strengthen the mind and body in defense of nation and religion. Within the verbal practices there are tales from Indian mythology, chronicles of the Indian struggle for freedom from the British, stories of Hindu rulers who fought against the Muslims, accounts of the life and works of HSS leaders, and finally, performances of songs and prayers. Although, for the purposes of our analysis here, these distinctions are crucial, it is important to bear in mind that the cultural activities conducted by both HSS and VF daily are inclusive of both verbal and nonverbal practices. It is also significant to note that most of these activities, whether verbal or nonverbal, are intended to promote a narrative of the Hindu way of life, imposing upon their audience an edifice of values and actions that constitute Hinduism for these organizations.

For instance, by way of their propaganda of Hindutva, the HSS and VF establish and utilize already established narratives from the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses to construct an array of neomythical narratives. In other words, primary myths are rhetorically deployed to produce a chain of narratives that achieve mythical dimensions of a secondary order within the ideological parameters of Hindutva, which is at several removes from the primary myth. I would first like to provide an analysis of the primary myths, specifically the mythical figureheads of the two Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, who emerge continually within the Hindutva ideology. Widely believed to be the incarnations of Lord Vishnu—the preserver within the Hindu trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu, and Maheshwar (the destroyer)—Ram was born around 5000 BCE and Krishna around 3000 BCE. The *Ramayana* is principally a story of the victory of good over evil. The basic storyline involves Ram, who goes into exile in the forest with his brother Laxman and his

wife Sita (an incarnation of the goddess Laxmi) through a ploy of his stepmother Kaikeyi. In the forest, Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravan from Lanka (modern-day Sri Lanka). In order to rescue his wife and destroy the ten-headed Ravan, Ram wages a war against the demon, aided by the army of the monkey-god Hanuman. This monumental and decisive war is interpreted to constitute the core of this epic and concretize the crucial struggle between good and evil. However, later renditions of the epic, which gained popularity among groups like the HSS in the 1990s, represent Ram as an aggressive warrior. As Matthew Biju and Vijay Prashad state, this epic has been “utilized for the recreation for Hindu religious and nationalist iconography in militant ways.” Significantly, the visual representation of Ram has undergone a transformation wherein he has been far removed from the earlier versions depicting “a benign and noble patriarchal civility, perhaps even humility.” While the former depiction is found framed and worshipped in domestic shrines as an image of a just ruler, brother, husband, and bestower of patronage “in a tableau which contains his power within a benevolent frame,” the latter image is endowed with the prowess of “a lone vengeful figure unleashing weapons” (Biju and Prashad 2000, 527). This modification of Ram exemplifies perfectly a transformation on the narrative plane and is a process that is carried out through a conjunction of verbal narratives and the production of corresponding visual rhetoric.

This transformation from the benevolent ruler to a warrior who took up arms to defend his nation, wife, and dharma is mirrored in the role of Krishna—the hero of the epic *Mahabharata*. While Ram and Krishna are the most widely worshipped among Vishnu’s incarnations, with each holding prime positions in the respective epics, there are marked distinctions in their characters. While Ram symbolizes images of what is seen as the perfect son, brother, husband, and king who followed the sacred law and the path of restraint till the end, Krishna is invested with a complex and morally ambivalent personality,

[H]is life story reveals a number of different facets; a child-god who loves playing pranks and practical jokes, a handsome dark skinned pastoral god who plays the flute and has hair adorned with peacock’s feathers. His oozing melodies ravish the mind and souls of the milkmaids [gopis]. Yet another facet to Krishna’s character is revealed during the moment he leaves the cow-herd’s settlement for Mathura and sloughs off his pastoral nature to become an accomplished ruler and statesman. He is the king of the Yadavas, and also

the shrewd politician and philosophical counselor of the Pandavas, who play a pivotal role in the epic Mahabharata.” (Dalapicolla 2003, 77)

But there are different aspects to this story, as the duality of Krishna’s character illustrates most strikingly. Even as a child, Krishna evinced extraordinary skills in exercising divine powers in the face of peril. Under more normal circumstances, he displayed affection and was a most endearing child, demonstrating a childlike impishness that is characteristic of him. He is playful, mischievous, disobedient at times, and yet simple and innocent. However, this simplicity quickly gives way to superhuman strength whenever he is pitted against challenges that could cause harm to his community or countrymen. Replete with tales of Krishna wielding divine powers to fight evil, the epic constructs the climax of his potential in the narration of the Bhagavad Gita. The Gita, which is the Hindu text approximating most closely the Gospel in Judaic religions, is primarily a compilation of Krishna’s sayings on matters spiritual and secular, most of which is constructed as an argumentative exchange between Krishna and his friend Arjun on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. This dual aspects of Krishna’s character—the apparent simplicity and charm and other endearing qualities juxtaposed with the determination and sternness that underscore his martial endeavors—stand out as essential elements of his godliness as reflected through his human incarnation. The mysterious interplay of his anthropomorphic existence—of the myth of the human and the human God—interestingly provides a significant subset of the religious, cultural, and political aspirations of the HSS and VF. Articulating the latent martial potential in every Hindu and invoking this therefore become the primary objectives of these organizations’ propaganda on Hinduism. The HSS and VF thus have been active in summoning up feelings of militant nationalism, inspiring their audience to the realization that they, too, can perform the aforementioned dual roles whenever their country or dharma so requires.

The act of transformation from benign ruler to aggressive warrior is rhetorically represented as an eye-opener, indicating the discrepancies that lurk within the character of Hindus and their enemies. Equally, the enemies of Hindus also harbor these dual qualities and may rise up in arms to defend their own religious positions. Inspired by the vast political potential of such ideologically invested rhetorical constructions, the Hindu educational organizations reinforce their political agenda of

“authentic Hinduism,” with the purpose of mobilizing their audience to defend an imaginary Hinduhood.

THE CONTROVERSY IN CALIFORNIA

Given the formulations of these narratives of inflexible Hindu cultural values by the HSS, along with the ESHI, HAF, and VF, to promote religious supremacy, it is not surprising that these groups would find alternative depictions of Hinduism questionable. Indeed, the construction of “exclusivist Hindu rhetoric” was most vividly articulated in North America in recent years in the issue of the California Hindu textbook controversy. What the ESHI unequivocally proclaims in contextualizing this debate is that there is a “preponderance of Hinduphobia at all academic levels in the United States” (n.d.). The material on Hinduism in sixth grade textbooks in the state of California reflects this abhorrence of Hinduism, the ESHI states. Supporting this viewpoint, the HAF insists: “We believe these comments clearly relay the urgency with which Hindus must counter this insidious Hinduphobia. With your support, we can ensure that Hinduism is represented in a fair and appropriate manner” (ESHI n.d.). The discrepancies in Hindu knowledge and education—between what the HSS and its allies deem “authentic” and the representation in the textbooks in question—are in reality microcosmic evidence of larger social, cultural, and political debates between Hindu conservative groups and other Indian American scholars, thinkers, and activists. In this case, too, representation of Hinduism becomes the pivotal point, a significant rhetorical category, which neither the conservative educational groups nor liberal Hindu scholars can effectively define. Subsequently, any imposition of an arbitrary compilation of Hindu religious ideas (regarded as authentic only by a selective minority) on sixth grade Hindu American children could incite a limited and restrictive religious, cultural, and nationalist ideology.

There are indeed a number of inaccuracies and flaws in the proposed textbooks, which the ESHI, VF, and HAF have enumerated. These grievances range from factual errors—for example, one of the textbooks notes that Hindi is written in Arabic script when actually it is written in the Sanskrit Devnagari script—to problems of “promoting colonial stereotypes” or “distortion and caricaturing of Hinduism.” While many textbooks “repeat colonial equation of Hinduism with caste, cow, curry and sati or the controversial Aryan invasion theory implemented to trace the origins of Hinduism,” a few of them also “describe yoga as

merely a set of physical and breathing exercises and the subtle doctrine of karma is explained as a theory where if you do bad deeds you may be born as an insect or a pig.” A set of comparative analytical categories is erected as well by these Hindu educational organizations to substantiate discriminatory treatment by the California Board of Education between Hinduism and other religions. As an example, VF and HAF note that “Buddhism is treated as an advance over Hinduism, whereas Christianity is never treated as an advance over Judaism.” Furthermore, “Hindu scriptures are referred to as ‘poems’ ‘stories’ and ‘myths’ whereas the Abrahamic scriptures are called Holy Books. The latter are dealt with from an insider’s perspectives, whereas Hinduism is treated often from a hostile outsider’s perspective.” Insensitive remarks and “obsessive negative focus” are also trademarks of discriminations meted out to Hindus: one textbook section describing the Hindu emphasis on vegetarianism has the title “Where Is the Beef?” and the Hindu goddesses Kali and Durga are referred to as “bloodthirsty” in another textbook. All the above-mentioned instances are characterized by the Hindu conservative groups as intentional and politically motivated means of ostracizing the Hindu community in the predominantly Christian western society of North America. The groups present the issue as one of a crisis of identity; Hindu American community members are encouraged to view such instances as typically indicative of an anti-Hindu stance that extends over national and religious borders. This readily distinguishes the enemies of Hindus, who lurk in all imaginable places, and demarcates their modes of oppression, establishing a perpetual state of crisis and urgency in response to which the clarion call of awakening Hindus then is asserted. Otherwise, the impact of such wrongful teaching would lead to “lack of self esteem in 11 year old children of Indic origin in California classrooms and expose them to potential embarrassment at the hands of their classmates” and would inevitably be “responsible for perpetuation of prejudices against Hindu Americans” (ESHI n.d.).

The perceived suffering of ignominy and the perpetuation of anti-Hindu sentiments form the basis for creating Hindu exclusivist rhetoric, one that is replete with narratives of a glorious Hindu Indian past that has been lost due to the infiltration of “other” religions in India—and therefore needs to be resurrected. Losing pride in Hinduism is a threat that most conservative Hindu American organizations regard as severe, especially since in a diasporic setting such losses seem to be always imminent. The California textbook controversy provided an opportunity for

Hindu conservative educational groups to fight against this perceived threat—they plunged into the debate, confirming prejudicial treatment not only by American educators in California, but also by all those Hindus who have strongly opposed any revision based solely on the recommendations of a handful of Hindu American educational groups, whose members see Hindus who disagree with them as a “[m]otley group of Indian American communists/Leftists (e.g., FOSA, ‘Coalition Against Communalism’ or academics such as Vinay Lal), Christian evangelical organizations such as Dalit Solidarity Forum (often pretending to represent Dalit [a minority caste in India] interests), Islamists, Sikh groups with an antipathy towards Hindus and academics with a track record of promoting stereotypes against Hindus. Interestingly these groups, often claiming to be ‘South Asian peace groups,’ are completely silent about the whitewashing of other South Asian religions like Islam, Buddhism and Christianity in these textbooks” (ESHI n.d.).

As a means of counteracting damaging treatment, the exclusivity of Hinduism is preached through reference to comments made by renowned western scholars and thinkers who have acknowledged the greatness of Hinduism and its position as an unparalleled ancient civilization.³ Robert C. Rowland and Abhik Roy claim that at the core of all Hindu nationalist rhetoric one can trace a grand mythic narrative. While nationalist sentiments form the motive behind this narrative, the production of myth serves as the means through which it is enacted. Describing the rhetorical characteristics of Hindu nationalist movements in India, they suggest that “religious fundamentalists use ‘myths of return’ to get back to the fundamental core of the faith. The most powerful stories in any culture are myths, which define who we are by providing a narrative essence for individual and social roles” (forthcoming).

Every society, as such, is exposed to narrative sequences that establish behavioral patterns its members are expected to follow. It is worth asking why, under “normal” and “daily” circumstances, these myths of splendor and glory lead a largely inactive life and are usually contained within rhetorical practices in the private sphere of household religious performances. And yet, the power of these apparently dormant practices within the quotidian private sphere is cleverly exploited by the religious

3. For example, Mark Twain once commented, “India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, grandmother of legend and great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only.”

revivalists—to drastic long-term effects in the political constitution of the national public sphere. One probable factor behind these dichotomous existences of the dormant and active stages in the life of such narratives might be found in Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the "inner" and "outer" domain of Indian national politics. The nation was perceived to suffer successive defeats at the hands of foreign colonizers such as the Muslims and the English in the "outer" domain of statecraft and material politics. However, the spiritual and moral supremacy of the Hindu nation was seen as forever undefeated in the "inner" domain of national consciousness in spite of the material defeats. The projection of such private-sphere myths into the national public sphere is therefore part of a rhetorical aggression that underlies militant religious nationalism, which can only construct itself in terms of a historicized cultural polemic (Chatterjee 1993).

THE DIVINE HINDU AND THE OTHER

Reclaiming such a glorious past for Hindu children in North America also necessitates close monitoring of their cultural development and education. Both in the public and the private articulation of the religious nationalist sentiments, however, as Rowland and Roy (forthcoming) point out, the representation of the "powerful enemy" remains constant. Within the HSS, ESHI, VF, and HAF discourses, moreover, the image of the enemy is frequently blurred by a constant shift in position. Rather than erecting the icon of a tangible enemy with legitimate grounds for grievance, these organizations construct a synthetic image of the enemy as culled from all the forces that are historically seen as threats to Hindu culture. But even so, this archetypal image of the enemy is subjected to interesting modifications according to the territorial locations of the movement in question, most significantly between RSS⁴ propaganda in India and that of its North American counterpart, the HSS. For instance, while the RSS is direct and vitriolic in its opposition to Christian missionary work in India, the HSS is far more moderate in its anti-Christian rhetoric, doubtless because of its operations within North America. At the same time, the HSS fully exploits its North American location, as the celebration of policies of multiculturalism within the United States provides new immigrants spaces to assert their cultural traditions. This is the

4. Rashtryia Swayamsevak Sangha is translated as the National Volunteer Corps—the mother organization of HSS, based in India and founded in 1927 during India's anticolonial struggle.

political juggling act forever executed by the HSS, and this is founded on its claim to be a predominantly cultural organization with no ties to Indian national politics, a claim that is hard to accept at face value.

The contemporary stories of war and sacrifice that continually resurface within the Hindu educational organizations' pedagogic discourse, needless to say, display a close affinity with the wars fought by both Ram and Krishna. The ultimate motive for such narratives, as stated earlier, is to install the logic of revenge by invoking a sense of religious and cultural ignominy suffered at the hands of followers of other religions. In the numerous biographies of great Hindu rulers and leaders, lessons on Hindu dharma and heritage, and tales of the contribution of Hindus in science and mathematics found in Hindu Right literature, there exists a metanarrative of suffering, oppression, and colonization.

For example, Balagokulam, a center for Hindu children's education in North America founded by the HSS, is devoted to the cause of raising kids in the image of Lord Krishna as well as reconstructing the mythical abodes of Hindu gods. Such a center ensures a safe haven for young Indian Americans, who are seen as unfortunate in their lack of direct access to Hindu culture. Describing it as the place where "Lord Krishna's magical childhood days were spent" and claiming that also "it was here that his divine powers came to light," the organization Web site stridently proclaims that "every child has that spark of divinity within" (*Balagokulam* n.d.). Therefore, "Balagokulam is a forum for Hindu children in North America to discover and manifest that divinity," thus enhancing their ability to appreciate their cultural roots. The pedagogic practices of teachers of Balagokulam as well as a quarterly magazine published by the organization are replete with mythic narratives indicative of passion, courage, strength, valor, and justice for men and docility, devotion, and sacrifice for women, occasionally juxtaposed with tales from the lives of HSS leaders and founding fathers. The magazine's pedagogic guidelines state the importance of presenting "role models" for children to learn and emulate, since "children learn values and habits mostly by imitating their role models. . . . Children select those people as role models whom they like, whom they respect, admire and adore" (HSS 2005).

The reconstruction of the conditions of Krishna's childhood (as in the Balagokulam centers) thus exemplifies the re-creation of the context of grand myths so that myth itself can be reproduced. In other words, the complex relationship between the texts and the audiences of the epics

is translated not through the act of creating entirely new narratives, but by reproducing past and popular “myths” within a foreign cultural setting. It is usually assumed that all Hindu children growing up in India have been influenced by the myths of Krishna’s childhood in shaping their identities. To be away from the land of Krishna’s birth deprives second-generation Indian American children of such knowledge and influence. At the same time, in order to keep the myth of Krishna alive, one needs to construct “centers” where these children can understand the specific moments of Krishna’s childhood. A reading of the texts on Balagokulam’s mission and goals, intriguingly, reveals not the idyllic bliss of fifth century BC rural India, but a training institution closely resembling other HSS organizations and their methods of *Boudhik* (intellectual) persuasion. In every story narrated to the children at this center, the underlying moral lesson emphasizes the heroism of Hindu rulers and the nature of Hindu dharma. The events of any historical period of India discussed here are arranged as a chronicle by the temporal order of their occurrence. They are then further organized into a story of the rise and fall of India’s glorified past, so that the arrangement of the events as a spectacle or processes of happening have a discernible beginning, middle, and end. Narrating a synchronic history of the nation, followers of HSS shape it much like a romance, where the hero of the narrative transcends his world experience and gains victory over it. The battle for political freedom is thus amalgamated with the battle for religious and cultural freedom, so Ram becomes a political icon over and above a religious one.

For instance, in the section on biographies, we find descriptions of the lives of leaders from two crucial periods of the history of India, namely, those of Mughal and British rule. Dwelling upon the courage and charisma of these personalities such as Prithviraj Chauhan, Queen Laxmi Bai, and Tanaji in the face of challenges posed by adversarial invaders and the plight of their communities under the tyrannical rules of Muslims and Christians, these accounts are in fact valorizations of Hindu cultures at the cost of intolerance for other religions. Each of the characters discussed is colored by qualities that are considered quintessentially “Hinduistic” by the HSS. These characters are united by their collective inclination toward the renunciation of worldly desires and an unquestioning dedication to traditional Hindu culture, closely followed by the virtues of prudence, diplomacy, in some cases celibacy (though mostly among men), reliance, and, of course, defiance and subversion

of oppressive regimes. Tracing the roots of some of these qualities to the characteristics of the mythical figureheads of Ram and Krishna, the themes of war and sacrifice also squarely fit into the treatment of the epics in the hands of the HSS. That is to say, since the HSS analysis of the epics largely includes the decisive battles as the core of its educative features, it is not surprising to see them transplanted into the scheme of the battles fought against the Mughals and the British. The Hindu way of life therefore becomes an irreducible and insatiable “warmongering” temperament that seeks revenge for all the tortures inflicted in the past. As such, we find ourselves in the midst of leaders who, though exceptionally commendable for their actions, are limited in these organizations’ depictions of them.

The first among these personalities described in the HSS literature is Swami Vivekananda, a great philosopher and spiritual leader of nineteenth-century India, a social reformer who worked to liberate society from the bonds of casteism, gender discriminations, and class conflicts. He traveled to the United States in 1895 to attend the Parliament of Religions conference in Chicago and persuaded his audience to understand the spiritual aspects of Hinduism in spite of India’s then contemporary colonial condition. In the HSS, VF, and ESHI pedagogic publications, Vivekananda stands apart as a Hindu preacher more than as a philosopher and social reformer. Vivekananda’s attempts to uphold the spiritual legacy of India invited compassion from the rest of the world at the plight of the colonized state, which for the HSS is tantamount to the real dharma or duty of the Hindu— not only to profess and promote Hindu values but simultaneously to depict the adverse material conditions imposed upon Hindus by their foreign colonizers. The ensuing arguments thus institutionalize political conditions as fundamentally driven by moral and religious forces. As such, rarely do we see in HSS literature any mention of Vivekananda’s vision of a free and secular India unified across religious borders.

Like Vivekananda, his favorite disciple Sister Nivedita has also found a venerable place in the HSS canon. The case of Nivedita is, however, somewhat different. A major transformation in her life occurred when she met Vivekananda in Ireland. Born of Irish parents, Nivedita (or Margaret Noble) was so profoundly impressed by the teachings and philosophy of Vivekananda that she joined the mission he founded to help him in his social reform movements in India. For the HSS, Nivedita’s embracing of the Hindu religion brought to light

the universal appeal of Hinduism that had been unfortunately suppressed by foreign rule. The following story from the HSS pamphlet describes the duty assigned to Nivedita and the way in which she performed her role:

From Europe she went to America. Her original aim was just to raise enough funds for her small school. But, upon her arrival in America, she found that the urgent task was to educate the Americans about India and her glorious culture. A great deal of false and malicious propaganda had been carried on against India and her religions by some Christian missionaries. They had grown extremely jealous of the tremendous impact on the West of Swami Vivekananda's powerful address at the Parliament of Religions and of the growing popularity of Hinduism, especially of the Vedanta, not only in America but in Europe. They had been systematically painting a totally misleading picture of India by blowing up her poverty, ignorance and superstition out of all proportion. These evil doings of so called men of religion were, she felt, an outrage against Christ himself. Like the Master, she went on a whirlwind tour of the States and addressed huge gatherings in all the principal towns and cities in order to educate the Americans about the real state of India at the time, the greatness of her past, the sublimity of her cultural and spiritual heritage and above all, the true causes of the present degradation. She was a gifted orator. She had steeped herself in India's history, her religions and her scriptures. In living words, charged with truth and invigorated by her sincerity, she depicted India in vivid colors. The audience felt a deep regret that they had let themselves be totally misled by pious frauds. They were thankful to Nivedita for revealing to them the very soul of India. She had succeeded in making America realize that India's degradation was essentially due to her long subjection to foreign rule. But she had not gained substantial success in raising funds for her school and for her other work in India. (HSS 2005)

While both Vivekananda and Nivedita's "dharma" entailed spreading the tenets of Hinduism, the subsequent stories from the biographies section of HSS Boudhik education for its members continue with an emphasis on the oppressions of the Mughal rulers. Narrating the stories of Prithviraj Chauhan, Rana Pratap, and Rani Laxmi Bai, the HSS once again foregrounds episodes of revenge, war, torture, and unfulfilled desires. In almost all of these accounts, the Hindu ruler's attempt at revenge is thwarted by their Muslim captors, and hence the sense of failure looms heavily over these tales. Such thwarted actions

thus become the site where feelings are invoked that might avenge the deaths of the Hindu rulers. To include these tales within contemporary contexts of Hindu cultural education among children of diasporic Indians provides an occasion to believe that the true nature of Hindu history is fundamentally a history of violence—of victories, defeats, or unfulfilled desires.

Contrary to the teachings of the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, where, in the end, the righteous prevails, with the downfall of the unrighteous, and peace is bestowed upon the commoners, the HSS treatment of the Hindu king frequently includes the failing of the “righteous” against the ploy of the “villain.” Each of these defeats is hyperbolically described so as to provide supernatural explanations for historical phenomena. Falling in between the real and the imaginary, these chronicles of violence embody a life constituted partially of truth and partially of myth. Every story only strengthens the conviction within the Hindu conservative groups of the “heathenism” prevalent among the Muslims and occasionally the Christians. The unified experience of betrayal is thus elevated to larger-than-life proportions and channeled into contemporary tales of war and conflicts. The cycle of reconstructing Hindu greatness is further kept alive through passages like the following from the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Krishna stridently proclaims to return to the world every time Hindus face a crisis of “dharma”: “[W]henver there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, then I send forth Myself . . . for the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of the righteous, I come into being from age to age.” Relating this in terms of its own Hindutva dharma, the HSS and VF especially have taken it upon themselves to provide the infrastructure necessary to surge forth with the task of liberating Hindus. The cycle of myths and remyths and neomyths of magnificence thus produced, though removed from historical reality, gathers momentum during communal controversies in both India and abroad. As Arvind Rajagopal states, “During the movement to build a Ram temple (at what was alleged to be his birthplace, on the site of a sixteenth-century mosque), in Ayodhya in India, shila puja [brick worship] were performed not only in villages across the country. In the US too, groups in 31 cities participated, sanctifying bricks through rituals and sending them to Ayodhya for the proposed Ram temple. These contributions were themselves substantial, and constituted an important financial support to the Hindu campaign” (2000, 474).

The Hindu conservative organizations' campaign against followers of Islam is also clear in documents that narrate the history of Hindu heritage. The Muslim invaders are generally held responsible for most of those ignoble Hindu social customs that continue to be harshly criticized for their discriminatory foundations. One such infamous practice was that of the self-immolation of widows, or *Sati*, which is described as an act of honor that: “[h]as to be seen in the light of the compulsions of alien rule in India during the medieval ages. From the 13th century onwards up to the coming of the British, the position of women was insecure under the rule of the Sultans of Delhi. Their insecurity increased after the demise of their husbands. This compulsion which was resultant of a particular age was by far the most important reason for the prevalence of Sati during the middle ages” (HSS 2005).

The HSS is aware that Sati is looked upon as a deplorable custom by the rest of the world, but their aim is to “highlight what kind of sacrifices have been made to keep our civilization alive.” It also explains “how the system of Sati and child marriage came into being during the Islamic rule in Northern Bharat. Children in America read about these topics in their school text-books or in the western media coverage of India. This explanation would clarify some of the questions on its origin and its prevalence today” (HSS 2005). Child marriage is also promoted as a practice undertaken as a means of saving the girl-child's life, which was otherwise threatened by the promiscuous activities of the Muslims.

THE MAKING OF A HINDU DIASPORIC MYSTIQUE

In the writings of nineteenth-century German Indologists such as Max Mueller, a certain romanticized and essentialized image of Hinduism and Hindu religious texts emerged that has been readily incorporated into the Hindu Right discourse as evidence of the superiority of Hindu thoughts and customs. Adapting some of the analytical frameworks of such scholarships, the HSS reading of Hindu cultures emphasizes the idea of the Hindu ascetic endowed with mystical knowledge. This spiritual image is then paradoxically juxtaposed with the materially rooted political struggle for the establishment of a Hindu nation. This is most effectively constructed through a rhetorical reproduction of narratives conflating the accomplishments of Hindu rulers in Indian epics with tales of Hindu leaders involved in the Indian struggle for independence. On one level, the HSS propaganda hinges on ancient Vedic wisdom of detachment from material politics, while on the

other it valorizes militant political conquest for the defense of one's national territory.

For the diasporic audience, moreover, an essential element of such a discourse of superiority is the contrast between Indian spirituality and the perceived materialism of postindustrial western societies. Whenever the needs of HSS propaganda require persuasive techniques to amplify the virtues of Indian spirituality, this spirituality is always favorably compared to the consumerist lifestyles of North American communities. Relating the basis of this "consumer behavior" to what it sees as "cultural" inadequacy, the HSS advocates:

With the collapse of the Communist world, the western democracies appear to be reigning all supreme, without any other viable political-economic system to challenge it. . . . However, soon enough, all that euphoria is subsided. Being open, democratic countries, impartial, critical assessments in those capitalist countries began, as days rolled by, revealing the inhuman face more and more. . . . The sole emphasis on material affluence as the source of happiness has led to unbridled consumerism leading to never-ending craze for acquiring more and more objects of material enjoyments. . . . At the root of all these problems lies a distorted and fragmented view of the world set afloat by science since the days of Darwin and Descartes. In this view, the world is conceived of as a mechanical entity, comparable to a machine whose parts, by themselves separate, have been joined together to form the whole. . . . As such, the values and views generated by this mechanical view have resulted in dealing with problems of man as if each one is distinct and separate from the other. . . . This has made the goal of human happiness and peace more and more of a distant dream. (Sakhalkar 1995, 5)

In this critique of the nature of "western democracies" by the Hindu propaganda groups, the criticism is directed toward a certain way of living, in this case, characterized as a "mechanical entity." Living according to these standards of "mechanization" entails an extreme form of individualism that results in a disintegration of communal living—a form of mayhem. Arguably, the structure of this narrative represents certain ideologically constructed notions about capitalist western culture that is part of this propaganda. Simplistically speaking, according to their agenda, all capitalist systems necessarily involve a mad scramble for material desires, which can lead only to despondency in the end. Publicizing this notion becomes doubly crucial for members of a demographic group

who have left their place of ancestral origin for better material opportunities abroad. Such an audience is always reminded of their critical situation, of the complexities associated with it, and that their loyalties are always in danger of being misdirected.

In a way, the success of Hindutva ideology is contingent upon the widespread publicity of “crisis” or “fear” (threats to spiritual and cultural identity) as much as it is on the tropes of “war” and “sacrifice” crucial to its historiographic discourse. As a part of this process of intellectual interpellation, this sense of fear is mobilized among the members of its target group. Though the HSS clearly does not propose a substitute for capitalist systems—say, to the effect of reverting to a feudal society—it voices a caveat against indulgence in what it sees as western lifestyles of individualism and consumerism. Looking upon its former colonizers with suspicion, the Hindu Right reiterates the dangers of being dominated by a western culture. It goes without saying, of course, that such discourses identify the West as a seamless whole where post-Renaissance British imperialism and contemporary North American capitalism are seen as easily interchangeable. Fearing a recolonization of one’s “culture” and of the sacrosanct private domain that has remained unblemished all through the history of colonial India, Hindu traditionalist texts resignify the importance of maintaining cultural superiority all the more in its diasporic contexts. At the same time, the results of an individualistic and consumerist lifestyle are counterpoised with the so-called spiritual qualities of Hindu cultural traditions to display how the latter can serve as an antidote to the former. For example, when the dejection from material interests becomes overwhelming, the ESHI proclaims, many westerners have recourse to the spiritual solace of yoga and other traditional rituals and practices. Similarly, Indians are encouraged to practice yoga to ensure that they do not fall into the traps of material desire whetted by lifestyles of consumerism.

The solution therefore lies in expanding the awareness of one’s self. And this becomes possible only when the individual is able to restrain his unbridled desires and emotions and harmonize them with the highest interests of society. And yoga is the word that signifies that restraining principle—that way of life which helps sublimating his self-centered thoughts, feelings and impulses into those of his wider personality—the society. . . . The leading physicists of the world have also started rethinking and discarding the materialistic,

fragmented concept of the world and of man and have been echoing the words of Eastern scriptures pointing to an integrated view of human personality. (Sakhalkar 1995, 9)

On a similar note, the HSS argues for the implementation of Hindu models of economic policies as opposed to the dominant capitalist model. The author claims: “The findings of the experiments on the subatomic particles showed an unbelievable semblance with the (intuitive) findings of the ancient mystic thinkers of India and China. All these revolutionized the western Scientists’ outlook, not only towards life and environment but also about the traditional wisdom and mystical writings of the Orient. . . . It is time, we have taken a second look at the basic issues in the discipline of Economics and modified it to reconcile the contradictions both at the methodological and the empirical levels. Hindu Economics rightfully provides such a modification” (Sakhalkar 1995, 3).

The very notion of Indian spiritualism here is mythologized to a scale such that it is rendered as an exclusive tradition, so much so that its meaning is changed: from reference to Indian doctrines on metaphysical objects to a body of knowledge fundamentally contradicting western cultural opinions and beliefs. Concurrently, the rhetorical success of this tradition is contingent upon similar constructions of North American diasporic identities, especially among young Indian Americans, who would now grow up to be defensive Hindus, practicing a Hinduism that seldom shows tolerance of diversity.

If these interpretations of Hinduism as written and promoted by the HSS, HAF, VF, and ESHI could successfully invoke a sense of injustice and patriotism in their audience, then we will find ourselves confronted with a group of young Hindu Americans in North America who are charged with a historically entrenched sense of grievance. Imposing upon itself the rhetoric of marginalization, which becomes doubly significant in the diasporic context, this group would then participate in a rhetoric that articulates the need to revisit history and undo the “wrong.” It is as easy for the diasporic audience to authenticate its subaltern status (due to its minority position in North America) as it is empowering to be able to act on behalf of the homeland. The dichotomy of *pitribhumi* (fatherland) and *karmabhumi* (land of work) in time becomes rhetorically critical, as these immigrant groups align it with the binary of the private and public domains.

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