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Afterword: whither Hindu nationalism and its others?

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ABSTRACT

Instances of anti-Christian violence in India reveal continuities and changes in the Hindu nationalist project. In terms of the former, I argue that the accounts of anti-Christian violence across the articles in this special issue testify to the ability of Hindu nationalism to move across social, political, and cultural terrains and to operate with long-term strategies for achieving its political goals. In terms of the latter, I argue that the articles also show us the ability of Hindu nationalism to transmogrify and shape-shift as it expands its imprint across India.

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As is well known, Hindu nationalism is, above all, a distinctive form of ethnic nationalism, in which Hinduness – *Hindutva* – is defined in territorial and ethnoracial terms, rather than in terms of religious doctrines (Jaffrelot, 1996, pp. 25–33; 2021, pp. 12–14). As Vinayak Chaturvedi (2022, p. 328) has pointed out, the foundational aspiration of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the great ideologue of Hindu nationalism, was 'a unified Hindu identity within a Hindu nation' (see also Bakhle 2024). Equally well known, the other that Hinduness and the Hindu nation was defined against was a compound entity, made up of Christian missionaries, British colonial rulers, and Muslims.

Interestingly, in Savarkar's ideological universe, Christians occupied a somewhat ambiguous position. 'The Christian minority is civil, has no extra-territorial political designs against India, is not linguistically and culturally averse to the Hindus and therefore, can be politically assimilated with us', he argued in 1938, in a presidential address to the 20th session of the Hindu Mahasabha in Nagpur (Savarkar, 1949, p. 31). Christians, then, were not entirely anathema to the Hindu nation, and it was conceivable that they could be absorbed into it through assimilation or conversion

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(Chaturvedi, 2022, p. 328; Bakhle 2024). It was Muslims who constituted the absolute other of the Hindu nation. At the same time, Savarkar sounded a note of caution about the influence of Christian missionaries:

> Only in religion they differ from us and are a proselytising church. So in that matter alone the Hindus must be on their guard and give the missionaries no blind latitude to carry on their activities beyond voluntary and legitimate bases. (Savarkar, 1949, p. 31)

What this signals is of course Savarkar's belief that it was necessary to wage 'a permanent war' for Hindutva, against its others (Chaturvedi, 2022, p. 3).

In early twenty-first century India, some 90 years after Savarkar delivered the address cited above, and a century after the kernel of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, was formed, that war is still very much ongoing – indeed, it has assumed the form of a project of statecraft under the BJP. And in this war, as the contributions in this special issue testify to, the battle lines between the Hindu majority and the Christian minority have hardened and arguably become less ambiguous than it was in Savarkar's thought. This hardening is writ large in the increase in anti-Christian violence by Hindu nationalists that is the point of departure and core focus of the articles in this issue.

In this afterword, I reflect on what these contributions – all of them incisive, important, and urgent – can tell us about continuities and changes in the project to build a Hindu nation as the BJP embarks on a third consecutive term in power since 2014.

As the editors, Sudhir Selvaraj and Kenneth Bo Nielsen, explain in the introduction to this issue, the contributions shed light on anti-Christian violence by Hindu nationalist forces in broad terms – that is, in terms of direct physical violence, but also in terms of structural violence and cultural violence. The four substantive articles in turn shed light of specific forms of violence enacted upon Christians across six different states. What emerges might not be a comprehensive national view of the state of anti-Christian violence in Modi's India, but it is certainly a composite portrait of how 'the Christian' has become increasingly central to the othering and violence that is at the heart of in a conjuncture where Hindu nationalism has consolidated an unprecedented hegemony in Indian society and in India's polity (see Nilsen, 2025). S. Harikrishnan's (2025) article offers us a view of the enactment of cultural violence against Christians in Kerala, specifically in terms of the Hinduisation or saffronisation of space. The article by Nidah Kaiser et al. (2025) shifts the focus of attention to Chhattisgarh, where the embedding of Hindutva in a 'deeper state' enables anti-Christian violence to endure even when the BJP is not in power at the state level. Kenneth Bo Nielsen (2025) shows us how an 'assemblage politics' that is attuned to local context and traverses the divide between state and civil society has

constituted Christians rather than Muslims as the primary other of the Hindu nation in Goa. In Sudhir Selvaraj's (2025) article, which focuses on Odisha and Karnataka, we are presented with an analysis that bears witness to how cultural violence against Christians flows easily between states and across scales – from the national to the regional – as a result of mobilising a broad and adaptable definition of the supposed threat that Christians pose to the Hindu nation. Clearly, the war against the Christian other has multiple fronts and is being fought with many different weapons.

In terms of what these articles tell us about continuities and changes in the Hindu nationalist project, I would like to make two very basic points: one, in terms of continuity, the forms of anti-Christian violence documented and analysed in these articles testify to the importance of an enduring feature of Hindu nationalism, and a central source of its potency, namely its ability to move across social, political, and cultural terrains and to operate with long-term strategies for achieving its political goals; secondly, and this is important in relation to what we might expect the future of Hindu nationalism to be, the articles also show us the ability of Hindu nationalism to transmogrify and shape-shift as it expands its imprint across India. The original north Indian upper-caste template, in other words, is not a Procrustean bed. Let me elaborate on both these points.

If we are to properly understand the durable character of Hindu nationalist hegemony across state and society in India in the early twenty-first century, it is imperative that we acknowledge, first of all, that we are confronted with something much more than an electoral mandate. This hegemonic power is the product of what Laurence Cox and I have called a 'social movement from above' (Cox & Nilsen, 2014) that has burrowed its way through Indian society since the 1920s. Under Modi, this reactionary social movement has taken a decisive hold of the state apparatus, and as we know only too well, the BJP is using its position as a governing party to redefine the grammar of Indian democracy in majoritarian and authoritarian ways (see Nilsen, 2021).

But what explains the success of Hindu nationalism as a social movement from above? I would answer that question by pointing to two factors. Firstly, the construction of a cellular movement network, the Sangh Parivar, which gravitates around the RSS and organises particular groups and sectors throughout Indian society, and which operates on the terrain of parliamentary politics through the BJP, is hugely important. Secondly, and in extension of this, the ability of the Hindu nationalist movement to constantly and seamlessly criss-cross the boundary between state and civil society is of decisive significance. What I mean by this is that the Hindu nationalist movement has been able to draw on synergies between different means that are mobilised patiently towards the same end. For example, the cultural and ideological common sense that has been fostered in civil society, centred on the construct of Hindu unity against ominous others, aligns with the statecraft

that inscribes Hindu nationalist ideology into the legal edifice of the state. Similarly, coercion and violence are exercised in tandem by vigilante groups and by public authorities in a manner that defies neat distinctions between civil and political society (see Nielsen & Nilsen, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023).

These facets of the Hindu nationalist movement are amply evident in the different dynamics and facets of anti-Christian violence that the articles in this special issue explore. The cultural violence that is at the centre of Harikrishnan's (2025) article on Kerala, where Hindu nationalists are engaged in the creation of a sacred geography is a good example of this. It may well be the case, as Harikrishnan argues, that this campaign operates at a strictly discursive level, without any aspirations for political success. However, we should also be cognisant of the fact that such efforts, which may appear to be 'merely cultural' (Butler, 1998), often pave the way for a more overtly political project to merge 'the nation-state with the Hindu people-nation' (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 109). Kaiser et al.'s article on Chhattisgarh reveals the inextricable entanglements between public authority and vigilante actors in the enactment of direct physical violence against Christians as the others of the Hindu nation. And the fact that this entanglement is embedded in a 'deeper state' that remains relatively intact regardless of the fluxes and flows of electoral politics both exemplifies and explains the resilience and durability that is a hallmark of the Hindu nationalist movement. In short, there is much in the intensified resort to anti-Christian violence under Modi's regime that resonates with the tried and tested methods that have underpinned the long-term rise of Hindutva in Indian society and politics. Considering what this rise has entailed for other vulnerable minority groups in the country, there is ample reason to be concerned about what lies ahead for India's Christians.

Let me turn now to a brief comment about how the dynamics of anti-Christian violence that are unearthed in this special issue might point towards significant aspects of Hindutva's future trajectories. Writing in the early 2000s, Christophe Jaffrelot (2001) pointed to the centrality of 'social engineering' in the Sangh Parivar's strategic repertoire. By deliberately courting the support and enlisting the participation of lower-caste groups, the movement was able to transcend its upper-caste parameters, which again was crucial for success in the domain of politics. Under Modi, this process has of course advanced even further, as the BJP has gained extensive support also among Dalit groups (Nilsen, 2025). However, there is also the matter of overcoming the spatial boundaries of Hindu nationalism, which has always had a north Indian base, by advancing into the south and the east of the country. This matter gained urgency after the 2024 general election, when the BJP lost support in its northern stronghold, but made gains in eastern and southern states. The key question is whether or not the

shape of Hindu nationalism will shift in its encounters with 'regional discursive formations' (Peet & Watts, 1996) as it attempts to expand in south and east India.

The insights that can be gleaned from the articles by Selvaraj and Nielsen provide some poignant insights in relation to this question. Selvaraj demonstrates how the use of a broad conception of the demographic, cultural, and political threat posed by India's Christians, coupled with the Sangh's extensive organisational infrastructure, allows for a great deal of flexibility in terms of how justifications for anti-Christian violence are constructed between different state contexts, and between states and the national level. Similarly, Nielsen's focus on assemblage politics in Goa shows us how Christians have been constructed as the primary antagonistic other of the Hindu nation using tropes and issues that resonate with the specific local context and articulates with regional histories, circumstances, and symbolic registers. To my mind, it is quite likely that dynamics such as these will become more prominent in the future trajectory of Hindu nationalism, if that trajectory is one of further attempted expansion beyond the Hindi belt of northern India. At the heart of these dynamics lie a capacity for 'symbolic engineering' (Flåten, 2016) that will be integral if the Hindu nationalist movement and the BJP are to be successful in maintaining and extending its hegemony. What this ultimately means is that the future of Hindu nationalism is likely to be one that is characterised by more variegated forms of saffronisation than what we have witnessed so far in the course of what is essentially an elite revolt against Dalit-Bahujan assertion. This variegated saffronisation should command the critical attention of critical scholars in the field of South Asian studies in the years ahead.

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