LONG-DISTANCE NATIONALISM: PERSUASIVE INVOCATIONS OF MILITANT HINDUISM IN NORTH AMERICA

DISSERTATION

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By

Subhasree Chakravarty, B.A., M.A.

The Ohio State University
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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Wendy Hesford, Adviser

Professor Jim Fredal

Professor Hugh Urban

Approved by

________________________

Adviser

English Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

My dissertation project seeks to address two distinct disciplinary lacunae. The first of these concerns the canon of “rhetorical studies” within the North American academy that has largely confined itself to Euro-American discourses. The second is the relative lack of rhetorical analysis within certain areas of South Asian studies, especially those concerning the development of immigrant subcultures and the rise of religious nationalism that have become such integral components of globalization, and have invited a spate of sociological, historical and political readings. “Long-distance Nationalism” will offer a sustained reading of persuasive strategies used by the diverse agents of religious nationalism within diasporic Hindu communities in North America. This project aims to bring a rhetorical perspective to the study of religion and religious politics, South Asian area studies, and to reorient the field of rhetorical studies to address transnational issues.

My objective in this project is to illustrate how the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangha creates narratives of cultural identity to persuade its diasporic audience in
foregrounding national sentiments that endorse exclusivist religious ideology. Specifically, this project raises questions concerning a) the invocation of a transnational Hindu identity b) the nature and representation of this identity in diasporic discourse and c) how such identities are employed in inciting religious nationalist responses. My study also attempts to provide a useful comparative dimension to an analysis of the nature of minority religious discourses in the US, simultaneously revealing patterns in the political rhetoric of religious revivalist movements across the globe.

Although the definition of ‘rhetoric’ includes uses of language, written or spoken to inform or persuade an audience, the discipline conventionally has been preoccupied with a prescriptive approach, intending to teach through guidelines, a practical art of communication. The goal of classical rhetoricians was therefore to prepare one to speak in conformity within established rhetorical conventions. In my dissertation I challenge this prescriptive approach as its narrow definitions of ‘rhetoric’ results in the exclusion of ‘other’ rhetorical practices. Like arguments put forth by feminist rhetoricians for the insertion of women’s and marginalized voices into an otherwise monolithic and Eurocentric canon – I turn to rhetoric as both a discipline and a mode of inquiry to explore strategies that might be considered persuasive in India and among diasporic Indians, that would broaden the scope of the discipline.

I argue that the rise of Hindu fundamentalist religious ideologies within the socio-political context of the modern, secular and socialist democracy of India is contingent upon strategic manipulation of cultural tropes like ‘myth’, ‘history’ and ‘time,’ which are already available within the archives of the national past. The manner in which these tropes are then transplanted and appropriated for the consolidation of religious
nationalism within post-industrial, 21st century North American Hindu communities thus becomes an interesting rhetorical challenge, especially when the audience is mostly comprised of second-generation Hindu immigrants who are geographically removed from the nation in question. For instance, Balagokulam, a day-care center founded by the HSS is devoted to raise Hindu children in the image of Krishna by reconstructing the mythical abodes of Hindu gods. This ensures, the HSS state, a safe haven for young Indian-Americans who unfortunately, will never realize the sanctity of Hindu culture.

Consequently, performative practices such as songs, yoga, meditation and indigenous martial arts, cultivated within the regulated atmosphere of the day-care center and other training camps organized for young adults, accommodate and adapt such narratives of ‘myth,’ forming powerful agents for the consolidation of communal identities. In these training sessions, the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are typically interpreted in terms of the monumental and decisive battles fought by Ram and Krishna in defense of their nation. Articulating the latent martial potential in every Hindu, the HSS instructors thus summon up feelings of militant nationalism so as to inspire their audience to perform such roles whenever their country and religion needs them.

My study interrogates and adapts theories and methodologies from the disciplines of Rhetorical, Religious and Postcolonial Studies. While Rhetorical Studies asks how persuasion works to impact the audience (e.g., to establish authority, or inform) at any given historical and cultural moment, Religious Studies offers insights into the ways in which religion, politics and culture interact. Furthermore, contemporary readings on the rise of South Asian diasporic nationalism by postcolonial theorists investigate the psychological, cultural, political, and social effects of colonial rule both in the country of
origin, and among its global diaspora. Such readings discuss the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and its influence in creating diasporic version of such nationalisms within the South Asian Hindu communities in the US. Drawing on the methods of the abovementioned theories I ask the following questions: a) How do the persuasive techniques implemented by the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangha expand common definitions of ‘rhetorical practices’, b) How do the mutually distinguishable tropes of cultural identity and religious belonging overlap in contemporary political discourse?, c) In what ways does religion invest specific human preferences as ‘transcendental’ and make it a necessary motif of identity for its followers? d) What ‘imperatives’ drive diasporic individuals to conduct trans-national religious movements, and to what extent are these ‘imperatives’ rhetorically constructed?

Written in response to a ‘lack’ of representation of non-western rhetorical practices within the discipline of Rhetorical Studies, my dissertation introduces marginalized ‘voices’ to broaden the scope of the discipline. At the same time, it raises concerns about the possibilities of secular democratic pluralism in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious postcolonial nation like India, that have recently witnessed a significant rise in exclusivist religious movements. Revealing that such movements are contained neither economically nor territorially within the confines of a single nation, this project explores the future of secularism in the face of recent trends of religious principles informing the nature of political systems and governance.
Dedicated

To the victims of religious riots in the Indian states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (1990 – 2002).
Deciding to join a Ph.D program in English was significant for me, but to remain loyal to that decision for four years emerged as a more daunting task. This process from admission to graduation was an eventful, enriching, spiritual and material quest. It was fraught with good and bad times, transnational movements, marriage and settlement into a diasporic life. In this journey, I was blessed with the companionship of wonderful friends, colleagues, committee members and family. It is now time to take a few moments and look back at those contributions without which this dissertation would have never been written.

First and foremost, I wish to thank my adviser, Dr. Wendy Hesford for her support and enthusiasm in me and my project. Her interest in my project that started even before I decided to join OSU never fluctuated and she will forever remain as a guide who made me see Rhetorical Studies in a novel way. I am also grateful to my other committee members Dr. James Fredal and Dr. Hugh Urban for their involvement; Jim for showing me the deep parallels between classical texts of diverse cultures and Hugh for opening up new vistas in South Asian religious scholarship that I would have scant chance of being associated with otherwise. I would also like to thank Dr. Nan Johnson for teaching me how to be a rhetorical critic and I admit she is the best rhetorician I have ever seen. The
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Finally, I am indebted to my family for always being ready at my beck and call. My mother for her silent acquiescence to all my endeavors and her sacrifices to see me smile, and my father’s support during the dissertation process makes my heart overflow with gratitude. I also thank my sister for listening and supporting in her own way ever since I left home. My extended family, uncle, aunts, cousins have always had faith in me and I thank them for keeping the memories of home intact even though I have traveled thousands of miles away from it. My deepest gratitude is of course reserved for my husband Saikat who first showed me twelve years ago that I could do this and be here. Saikat has been an extension of me for all these years and I know will continue to be so. This knowledge alone makes life worth living and such challenges never truly daunting.
VITA

January 20, 1976………………Born – Calcutta, India

1999……………………………M.A. English, Benaras Hindu University

2000-2005………………………Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

2005- present………………….Lecturer, McMaster University, Canada

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English
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“We are told, in line with our loquacious Indian culture, that the real hardship of death consists of the frustrating – very frustrating inability to argue.”

- Amartya Sen (The Argumentative Indian)
PREFACE

Religious Identity and Political Modernity

Ultimately, the decisive factor of the Hindutva movement whether in India or abroad rests with the construction and invocation of ‘religion’. In the US, the construction of Hindu religious identity is a self-conscious deliberative move by the new and second-generation immigrants, to establish a meeting ground, a community space that could be widely used for cultural reproduction. Hindu rituals, proved a convenient medium for drawing Indians together in the US across regional and linguistic boundaries. As these educated, affluent members of the Indian American society generated a private cultural identity through the Hindutva network in the US, they also conjoined with their Indian counterparts to make the transition from a mere critical oppositional force to a mainstream political one in India. Hindu nationalists in India, apart from a few exceptions, have always sought to avoid any explicit adherence to religious grounds of political mobilization precisely because in India, it always runs the danger of further dividing the society along sects and castes. To run a full order mass movement in India, it is to the interest of the political parties, religious and secular alike, to keep any overtly religious nationalist mobilization to a minimum, if they were at all interested in political
gains. In the rise of the power of the BJP government in India in 1998, the people saw a
distinctive split between the ways the general population constructed its loyalties to
Hindu nationalist sentiments and the manifestations of conservative nationalist ideals in
the current projects of the Hindu right. Consequently, the BJP party leaders had to modify
its extremist position with the issue of establishing a temple on the birthplace of Ram,
before they could convince the members of their coalition for support. Arvind Rajagopal
has argued it is the syncretic practices of the Hindu Right successfully led by the VHP in
North America, that had led to subsequent ritual-based religio-political mobilization in
India.

The construction and publicization of ‘Hindu religion’ in the hands of
conservative Hindus in India and the US, summons up unresolved debates between
nationalism, political modernity and religious identity As such, one of the primary
interest that motivate my project here, namely the relationship between global political
forces and the rise of religious orthodoxies, needs to be amplified. Not that I wish to
provide an explanation on how this growing trend can be stopped on its tracks, or if there
is one clear way of analysing these movements. A major problem with such approaches –
apart from depicting a frighteningly homogenizing tendency - is situating, with very few
exceptions, both the causes of most religious fundamentalist activities and sometimes its
results too, within non-western nationalist contexts, culturally as well as geographically.
As such, most of the times when we read about these movements, they are always forever
removed from the centre of global metropolises, their blue prints apparently designed in
the dark caves of extremely rural, rough geographical terrains that have amazingly (may
be admirably) escaped Western modernity and its influences. Yes, my main point of
reference is the development of images of Islamic fundamentalists following Osama Bin Laden’s achievements across the world. To some extent, most theorists speaking on the rise of fundamentalism and globalization have argued that fundamentalism is an exclusively anti-modern force, and therefore by implication, is politically inclined to oppose all forms of cultural, social and political modernizations. In situating the locale of my work within the most influential and so-called progressive ethnic minority group in the US, who unabashedly derive sustenance from capitalist influences as well as religious conservative forces, I have tried to state an imbalance in the equation. In this I have found support from a selected group of social theorists like Chetan Bhatt, Parita Mukta, Arvind Rajagopal, Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad. Their examination and exploration of how the Hindu diaspora from South Asia, comes to term with their new location and assert themselves through spaces provided by multiculturalism and invocation of religious identities and furthermore promotes transnational alliances, have provided strong evidences of the changing configurations of Hindutva nationalism in its operations in the US. At the same time, I have attempted here to join the conversations already prevalent among postcolonial theorists like Dipesh Chakraborty, Partha Chatterjee, Ashish Nandy, Mustapha Kamal Pasha on issues of non-Western modernities, and its political implications on postcolonial countries. Within these postcolonial theoretical debates, I have tried to locate my observations on the rhetorical practices of the Hindutva group, as a means of bridging the gap between these apparently mutually exclusive disciplines, and in the hope of opening up yet another thread of criticism on the nature of religious discourse and practices of India. In this and the next section, I will try to provide a
context for my arguments in this dissertation, and pose those questions that I have found most inspiring in framing my project.

Can we bifurcate modernity into ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’? Though not explicitly discussed there is a predominant sense that modernity is all ‘theirs’ and very little ‘ours’. And then the burden of ‘their’ modernity becomes very difficult for ‘us’ to bear, and we assert ourselves right back through our anti-modern religious stance. In a nutshell, religious fundamentalism is frequently looked upon as a community’s unique reaction against modernity. In a country as that of India, with its cultural and religious heritage, it is fairly easy to ascertain the cause of religious conservatism as a form of anti-colonial struggle. However, it is also indeed true that religious fundamentalist tendencies are only formulated to represent a selective group of people, and are never symptomatic of an entire nation’s sentiments. Since we almost can never attend to fundamentalism without seeing it as a reactionary force, it will be interesting to note the beginning of the usage of the term fundamentalism.

Indeed, the term fundamentalism was originally Christian. It was invented to describe the reaction first by US Presbyterians and then by other Protestant groups to two threatening intellectual trends: higher criticism, a novel historical approach to biblical studies, and the growing popularity of Darwinian theories about the origin and genealogy of the human species. In 1910, in response to these challenges, US Presbyterians drew up a list of criteria for discriminating between true believers and everyone else. These five points were called the fundamental principles of true Christian faith: the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Jesus, the death of Jesus on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for original sin, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the authenticity of miracles. Other evangelicals made their own list of basic beliefs. The lists were published in a series of volumes, The Fundamentals, which were produced from 1910 to 1915 and marketed to a mass audience of believers. In 1920, the authors of these lists began describing themselves as fundamentalists to signify their identity as Christians engaged in preserving the fundamental tenets of their faith (Tetreault, 1).
No matter what instigated the beginning and meaning of fundamentalism, we see it as inherently pluralistic in nature, both in its dogmatic and organizational tendencies. It is as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri calls a “poor and confused category that groups together widely disparate phenomena” (146). It is chronologically post-modern, since it follows after and resolutely opposes the secular insinuations of modernity and modernization, and politically post-modern in being quintessentially anti-Western. One cannot help but agree that in the post 9/11 political ambience of Europe and North America, fundamentalism loses its diversity and is reduced to a social formation that is unequivocally anti-Western as well as anti-Christian. Coupled with it, is the recurrent motif that most fundamentalist organizations take refuge in, say the erection of a traditional and in some ways premodern world. In the chapter on writing of histories by the HSS, I discuss the appropriation of this tradition/modernity conflict in the writing of histories of the Hindutva group. Two distinct trends of criticism, on this appropriative gesture inherited by most fundamentalist groups, have evolved in recent times. On one hand, we have the more directly topical argument forwarded by Hardt and Negri in their book *Empire*, where they claim that this return-to-the-past theme is incidentally based on a form of historical illusion. On the other hand, we have opinions of critics like Dipesh Chakraborty and Partha Chatterjee, who see it as a moment for revisiting traditional notions of modernity and its internal divisiveness that renders the distinctions between ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’, modern and premodern, political and prepolitical. I have laid out these arguments in details in chapters two, three and four, however, I would like to discuss here how these claims illuminate the contextual location and contested ideas of cultural, social and political modernities.
Hardt and Negri’s argument, about fundamentalists’ visions of returning to a premodern world actually being a “fictional vision projected in the past”, tells us much about the marriage between postmodernism and fundamentalism. According to these authors, “the purity and wholesomeness of the stable, nuclear heterosexual family heralded by Christian fundamentalists, for example never existed in the United States. The traditional family that serves as their ideological foundation is merely a pastiche of values and practices that derives more from television programs than any real historical experiences within the institution of family”(148). Rather than looking backward for an idyllic historical past, it is in reality a political critique of the contemporary social order.

On a similar note, Hardt and Negri see the current forms of Islamic fundamentalism, not as a craving for return to past social values and forms, but rather an “original thought” that are in essence directed against the present social order. This notion of the “original thought”, also destabilizes the nomenclature of Islamic Fundamentalism, as it is fundamentalist only in so far as it tangentially refers to the textual basis of Islam into two original sources “the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet Mohammed”(148). Referring to the “original thought” of Islamic radicalism as more of a new invention, the authors claim to understand the anti-modern thrusts of these movements as more postmodern than premodern. Curiously adjoining the birth of both postmodernist and fundamentalist waves across the globe to an irreducible response to the same situation (may be anti-modernism), Hardt and Negri in a widely sweeping gesture state that,

Certainly, bands of popular support for fundamentalist projects – from the Front National in France and Christian fundamentalism in the United States to the Islamic Brothers – have spread most widely among those who have been further subordinated and excluded by the recent transformations of the global economy and who are most threatened by the increased mobility of capital. The losers
Although I find Hardt and Negri’s argument of this convergence of postmodernist and
fundamentalist thoughts commendable, I do not agree to their identification of
postmodernist features among religious fundamentalist groups, as simply a refusal to
submit to the assimilative tendencies of Euro-American modernist hegemonies. Whether
teleologically or spatially, long before the advent of what we now call postmodernism or
its tenets of increased mobility, cultural hybridity and indeterminacy, a certain ideology
of secularly countering Western modernity was already developing in the colonized
world of the 19th century. Likewise, while reading the objectives of South Asian diasporic
communities, one cannot clearly distinguish between the instances of either capitalist
liberations or religious sufferings that they derive from current global, postmodern
inclinations.

Here, I would like to bring forth Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of rise of anti-
modernist tendencies among Indians in the 19th century to supplement my argument
above, that postmodernism did not provide a unique and perfect crucible for germinating
the seeds of anti-modernism. Chatterjee refers to instances from the writings of
nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals like Rajnarayan Basu, who attempted at
conceptualizing ‘our’ modernity, an indigenous modernity that contradicted any
universally held values of what modernity might represent. Rajnarayan Basu’s concern
was with the new society of nineteenth century, which was inextricably linked to Western
education and thought. This new society, Basu thought, suffered from seven serious
ailments in the fields of health, education, social life, virtue, polity and religion. It has to
be noted here, that Rajnarayan Basu was a social reformer and favoured modern ideas very much, yet he uncovered great differences between a past where people were not so cunning, shrewd, selfish and ungrateful but were caring, compassionate and what more – genuinely religious. At some point in his discussion of the decline of his present society, Basu agrees that he somewhat exaggerates the comparison. But this should not divert the reader’s attention from his observation, that if we are uncritically imitating forms of European modernity we are basically “bringing upon us environmental degradation, food shortages, illnesses caused by excessive labour and an uncoordinated and undisciplined way of life” (Chatterjee, 269).

What we learn, from Rajnarayan Basu’s enumeration of the hazards of imitating European modernity, is that modernity is neither static nor monolithic. Forms of modernity must vary depending upon geography, time, environment and social conditions. In fact, Chatterjee sums up the real project of modernity as he says “if there is any universal or universally acceptable definition of modernity, it is this: that by teaching us to employ the methods of reason, universal modernity enables us to identify the forms of our own particular modernity” (270). It is indeed surprising, to see that even after more than hundred years since the publication of Basu’s articles, Indians still view in modernity, signs of social decline rather than progress. The cause of such distrust is not based on any “post-modern irony” as Chatterjee states, but in the condition under which modernity was implemented in the colonized Indian state. It will be useful here to compare Hardt and Negri’s argument of fundamentalist postmodernism with that of Chatterjee’s discussion of the nationalist projects of modernity in postcolonial countries. For the purpose of my project too, I see, within the discourses and rhetorical practices of
the Hindutva group not only a simplistic anti-modern resistance but also an effort at nationalizing modernity. Certainly, the HSS group, due to its location and operating grounds in North America, cannot be purely motivated by a destructive anti-modernist approach. But then it is neither free from naming its own modernity, as a means of coming to terms with the Indian American community’s own colonial hangover manifested though a scepticism of universal modernities. As Chatterjee so poignantly observes, that because the history of modernity in India is forever linked with the history of colonialism, we shall never be able believe that there exists a universal domain of modern free discourse, not impeded by differences of race and nationality. Because of this twisted ‘tryst with destiny’ we had realized the close proximity between ‘modern knowledge’ and ‘modern regimes of power’ even in the nineteenth century and that we would always “remain consumers of universal modernity, never would we be taken seriously as its producers” (275).

We have been talking at length here about anti-modernist propensities, mostly in reference to religious fundamentalism. I should make it clear that anti-modernism is not necessarily a rejection of modernity. It is not so, because modernity is fundamentally a philosophy of independence and self-reliance brought upon each individual through his/her autonomous decisions based on the dictates of reason. Of course, this does not mean that each and everyone should be allowed to take individual decisions taking into account only their individual circumstances; on the contrary within the field of modernity we acutely differentiate between domains of individual self-interest and those of collective interests. But the anti-modernity, that we are looking upon here, is not really antagonistic to the entire philosophy of modernity. It could rather be read as progressive,
encompassing a sense of modernity, that is not stationary but is continuously evolving both horizontally and vertically. We should remember at the same time, that though modernity actually entails the ushering of progressive ideologies, often adopts an immobile status. In reality however, a static modernity ceases to perform its basic task, it stops being progressive. To borrow from Partha Chatterjee again, he shows how once it was modernity that put forth the strongest argument in favour of colonialism. Colonial rule was necessary for the non-Western world we are continuously told, since this was the world that first and foremost needed to be enlightened. And interestingly then, it was the same modernity and its reasons, that led us to discover that imperialism was illegitimate; “the burden of reason, dreams of freedom; the desire for power, resistance to power: all of these are elements of modernity. There is no promised land of modernity outside the network of power. Hence one cannot be for or against modernity; one can only devise strategies for coping with it”(Chatterjee, 280).

Nationalism is intertwined with modernity. Some critics, like Bruce Lincoln, define nation as one which comprises of a population that constructs and sustains a single collective identity. The state on the other hand, is essentially a governmental apparatus that manages the political affairs of the nation, for which it takes responsibilities and over which it exercises power. He explains that the nation and state came together in the West during the nineteenth century to produce a distinctive socio-political formation of modernity, but they have separate genealogies and divergent characteristics. Moreover, the modern state, Lincoln says, is a child of enlightenment born of reaction to the wars of religion. The modern state is built up by reducing its dependency on religious institutions for ideological and bureaucratic functions. However, the modern nation in direct contrast
to this, originated in Europe with attempts to expand capacities for organized violence, by people who felt themselves threatened by more powerful neighbouring states (Lincoln, 63-64). Lincoln must have in mind a secular modernity, which is the brain child of European Enlightenment, and which imposed this version of the nation-state to its colonies through the colonized educated elites. But the faces of modernity in postcolonial nations are not the same as in Western discourse, and therefore neither are its observations on secularism and nationalism similar. Lincoln’s argument is apt, but unfortunately limited within the privileged domains of Western modernist theories. In case of religious fundamentalism of India, religion acts as prime source of national identity. Religious nationalism is a modern political phenomenon, embedded in a wider cultural milieu. For Mustapha Kamal Pasha, in the context of South Asia, religious nationalism aims to primarily restructure national space, to redefine nationalism and to redirect modernization. Religious resurgence seeks to strengthen the modern state and its capacities, through dependence on the modern apparatuses of science and technological knowledge. And for this it has to depend on mass communications, and an expansion of the public sphere. Therefore, religious nationalism is not a rejection of modernity, but rather an inversion of its earlier secular character (Pasha, 136). Specifically the Hindutva movement seeks a redefinition of Indian identity, politics and society. In the wake of this movement, we are uncompromisingly reminded of the salience of religion in South Asian daily life. It also served as an eye-opener, in delineating the inseparability of contemporary religious movements from the institutional apparatus’ of modernity, including among others, its market economy and the new developments in the fields of social contact and communication. The HSS group in North America is an interesting
case, where the alternative narratives of modernity proposed by them, are in reality
themselves conspicuously modern. The importance of mass media, in promoting these
religious ideologies is exceptionally significant and as Pasha states,

> Whether one speaks of religious TV serials or national reporting of communal
> riots, the mass media help crystallize an imagined political community of the
> nation, eliding or erasing internal differentiations of class, caste, language and
> ethnicity while simultaneously heightening religious differences. The creation of a
> national space, once little more than a modernist dream, becomes possible only
> under new social and technological conditions (146).

Whatever the means of communication espoused by the Hindutva religious group,
it essentially complicates its relationship with Westernization. It has been my endeavour
in this dissertation to mark, how the HSS has no trouble in implementing the technical
and instrumental resources of Western modernity, while simultaneously rejecting its
cultural expressions. And in their construction of a picture of bygone days of Hindu
superiority, albeit a construct for political achievements, we still can see an attempt at
creating our own social models for coping with western modernity. In the words of
Partha Chatterjee, “ours is the modernity once-colonized”, and therefore our attitude to
modernity would always remain deeply ambiguous. We are much influenced by
modernity even as we understand its trappings of colonization, since “the same historical
process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of
modernity” (Chatterjee 281).

**The Current Status of Postcolonial Rhetoric**

I have especially reserved this last section, for discussions on the abovementioned
topic, not only because it guides some of the central theoretical underpinnings of this
dissertation, but also because it is significant to me as a postcolonial member of the discipline. We, the members of the discipline of Rhetorical Studies, are more or less conscious of the limitations of the discipline’s present structure. Critical and feminist rhetoricians have critiqued the disciplinary paradigms of Rhetorical Studies, for being linear and consequently harbouring bipolarizing tendencies. Some have attended to it as a historiographic project, revisiting the histories of rhetoric, looking for ways in which such histories have been principally exclusionary while some others have intervened the canon through an inclusion of feminist and other marginalized voices. But then, we have paid very little attention to the process of ‘revision’ itself. What do we really mean when we attempt to ‘revise’ the canon? Are theoretical inclusions, the only way to expand the scope of our discipline? How many of us should join together to make a substantial ‘revision’? To what extent do numbers- whether in terms of articles published, or conference sessions or even graduate students and scholars - matter in order to ‘revise’ the canon? I ask these questions with specific purposes. First, my objective is to encourage a significant increase in the study of postcolonial rhetorical practices, within the discipline of rhetorical studies. Second, although I cannot deny that we do occasionally hear voices like Raka Shome’s and Gloria Anzaldua’s, inviting for a reordering of the ways in which we construct our scholarships and their representations, these voices are somewhat marginalized, since in spite of their invigorating appeals we see very little noticeable change in the disciplinary rubric.

By noticeable change here, I mean, we fail to see more instances of scholars of rhetoric embracing postcolonial theoretical perspectives, to delineate the variegated configurations of rhetorics. There are many factors, that contribute to an absence of – for
the lack of a better word – postcolonial coloured voices in the discipline. But one that has
become increasingly clear to me through graduate school, and now as I prepare myself to
face the tough job market, is the lack of adequate representation. There are very few of us
from non-western, postcolonial backgrounds, and I mean both geographically and
culturally, who apply for higher education specializing in Rhetorical Studies. Rhetorical
Studies have failed to encourage us with either an intellectual dynamism of diverse
scholarship, or a reasonable state of comfortability that would provide an excellent
environment for those like me, looking for recruitment in this discipline. The problem
here may seem to be more about publicity, that the discipline has not taken recourse to
adequate measures, to spread its word globally. But is it really so? Here, let me refer to
the article published by Raka Shome named *Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical
Canon*, for some insight into the matter. Shome draws our attention to three common
practices, carried out within the discipline of Rhetorical Studies: a) that our discipline has
been disturbingly silent about its own disciplinary position in relation to race and neo-
colonialism, b) that there is an absence of any interrogation of our white universalistic
rhetorical paradigms constructed through the theories of Aristotle, Plato, Burke, Toulmin
or even Perelman, that constantly feature in our own scholarship and that we hand down
to our students and c) though we have sometimes acknowledged the problematic position
of the modernist subject on which rhetorical traditions are largely based, we have almost
never identified this modern subjects as also a subject of colonialism (Shome, 598-599).
To this I add, how have Rhetorical Studies adapted itself to issues of modernity? Does it
see modernity as only a Western paradigm of knowledge structures or does it see
modernity as a fragmented body that is specifically, cultural, racial and politically divided?

To understand the scope of modernity, and its influence on the study of Rhetoric in North American Academy, I would like to briefly discuss certain contemporary criticisms on the scope of the discipline. Like I said earlier, most of these critiques deal with the history of the development of rhetoric as a persuasive genre. The emphasis on “figural history” determined part of the status of Rhetorical Studies as it rests today upon its ability to form distinct, neat categories while structuring the narrative of the canon. In his article, *Status, Marginality and Rhetorical Theory*, Robert Hariman explains why ‘status’ is a crucial element in the discussion of genres of discourse since it includes “one’s rank, reputation, esteem, prestige and place in society” (Hariman, 36). In other words, it enables to establish the privileges and powers of the discourses in the verbal sciences. Using, Hariman’s notion of the significance of status, it has been claimed by some that rhetorical studies in its urgency to retain its status in the departments of humanities used figures or agents that gave its history a coherent, unified narrative. As Hariman points out “Rhetoric will always have to answer Plato’s question of its merit” (36). As a way of answering then, rhetoric chose to represent a cultural tradition founded upon the ideal of the orator – the ‘good man speaking well’- and their texts that were more likely to be handbooks of performance, rather than theoretical inquiries. The goal of the classical rhetorician therefore became, to prepare others to speak in conformity with the established rhetorical conventions. As a result, rhetoric has always struggled to be represented in relation to some conceptual beginning, which more often than not was consistent with the rules validated in Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*. Therefore according to
Jane Sutton, today the traditional picture is impoverished since “it is not that history
forgot the rare, the exception, the unique; rather it is that each has been systematically
excluded from a history that seeks uniformity, consistency and probability to the
principles of a given type (universal ‘man’)” (Sutton, 158). Traditional historiography of
rhetoric thus represents a history of rhetoric, that is significantly enough, free of
contradictions.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the word rhetoric came to be used in
two ways. First as a name for discourse itself as a discrete phenomenon; second to
designate discourse that itself describes or explains discourse, a meta-discipline (Oravec
and Salvador, 173). Using the latter perspective of rhetoric as an analytical tool,
revisionist historiographers have moved the focus of analysis from the rhetorician to the
historian and as such to the writing of rhetoric’s histories. This approach makes the
historiographer aware that the task of writing history is itself a rhetorical affair and so the
choices of the historian should be brought under scrutiny. Aristotle’s definition of
rhetoric, as the ‘faculty or power of discovering in the particular case what are the
available means of persuasion’, was influential in shaping the discipline’s perception of
the meaning of rhetoric as a strategic art till the 1960’s. The post 1960’s political
atmosphere, generated the need for distinct rhetorical theories, suited to the significant
grassroots social movements like the civil rights, the antiwar movements and the
woman’s liberation movements. All of these major political struggles began to question
the applicability/effectiveness of classical models of rhetoric and communication for the
marginalized groups who sought to overturn what they perceived to be rigid social and
political hierarchies and hegemonies. What was simply needed during this time of
political unrest was multiple meanings and theories of rhetoric. As James Berlin writes in his essay *Revisionary History*, historical investigators should seek out “multiple and disparate rhetorics rather than any single, universal and timeless formulation” (135). The guiding principle to analyze rhetoric should be he asserts “concern for the role it fulfilled for its users at its own historical time and place” (135). He however adds, that this does not mean that are no common properties between rhetorics. The fact that they all focused on communication makes them a part of rhetorics. Considering the plurality of rhetoric at any given moment Berlin provides a model for writing history in a poststructuralist milieu as he calls upon the critique of traditional history offered by Michel Foucault. Applying Foucauldian notions of historiography Berlin refers to most of rhetorics history as “a temporal movement” disavowing accidents and deviations. Not only so, these historical narratives unfold the stories of “great individuals” and “heroic rhetoricians”, their greatness and irresistible wisdom, without taking into account the role of the historian in shaping the events presented. The new histories of rhetoric, that would suit the poststructuralist orientation of contemporary worldview, thus have to be situated between “the realms of the material and social on the one hand and the political and cultural on the other” (Berlin, 141). The significance of rhetoric can therefore only be seen while considering it within the economic, social and political context in which it appears. Since there are only competing ideologies in any historical moment, there are only competing rhetorics.

The post 1960’s era also ushered in a new wave of criticism in the humanities that combined radical politics with radical language theory. Widely acclaimed as poststructuralist theories, these theoreticians disrupted Sassure’s notion of the sign as the
neat symmetrical unity between a signifier and signified. Meaning, therefore we might say is never identical with itself implicating that language is a much less stable affair than the classical structuralists had considered. Utterances must be seen in their context to interpret meanings that are subject to change as the context changes. In his criticism of ‘first principles’ or foundational concepts Jacques Derrida explains that these first principles can always be deconstructed since they are commonly defined by what they exclude, the binary opposition, for instance black and white, self and other, rhetoric and nonrhetoric. Deconstruction undermines such binary oppositions and claims that they represent a way of seeing - typical of ideologies - by drawing rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not. The rise in poststructuralist theories and its intersections with rhetorical theory re-established that our works as rhetoricians are not merely academic, they are cultural, political, and social and they demand those attentions. Keeping in tune with these demands, feminist historiographers of rhetoric looked upon new ways to define the role of the rhetor.

While re-visioning of the tradition entails attempts to pluralize the meaning of rhetoric, the feminist historiographers venture to re-map by expanding the territories of conventional rhetorical practices and re-figure by problematizing concepts of identity. The underlying assumption in contemporary feminist historiography has moved the spotlight from “whether woman should be added to the history of rhetoric to how and on what grounds should they be recuperated and examined in different periods” (Johnson, 11). As most feminist historiographers argue, the criteria for inclusion in the canon have been largely dominated by conventional patriarchal formulations of women’s role in society. Hence both Nan Johnson and Barabara Biesecker agree that to reconfigure the
canon it is imperative to take “the eloquence of women in its many forms into consideration” (Johnson, 9) and not only those that loyally reflect the patriarch’s perception of what woman rhetoricians should be. Feminist historiographers have now become self-reflexive since in their account of the rewritten history of rhetoric they admit that “no individual women or set of women, however extraordinary can speak for all women” (Biesecker, 170). So the question rests not only about what the gender of the rhetorician is or can be but also about his/her skin colour, political, racial and other cultural backgrounds.

The subject of rhetoric is therefore the most significant factor of Rhetorical Studies today. Michel Foucault has repeatedly expressed in his theories on the human sciences that all human experiences are inherently rhetorical. As such the study of any discourse should at all times be aware of the ways in which language or discursive formations form subjects and the material and social conditions of their experiences. Moving onwards from the speaker to the speakers, from the active to the passive, from the dominant to the subaltern, attempts to situate Western rhetoric not at the helm of any essential origin but in the realm of chance, of accidents and sudden appearances. As long as the historian of rhetoric looks for a comprehensive history where there are eternal rhetorics, immortal rhetoricians and a universal human discourse that is same at all times in all places, rhetoric will fail to accommodate the rhetorical possibilities of ruptured identities.

I have attempted to address these issues within the various chapters of this dissertation. I have situated the locale of Indian rhetoric at the heart of a culture, which endorsed a heterodoxical tradition in its unique way. By admitting this into the present,
largely western dominated disciplinary structure of Rhetoric, I have tried to pose ambiguities as to what rhetoric might come to stand for. As Raka Shome observes in her article, that rhetoric as a discipline has been built upon public address systems. But historically, public address has been a realm where mostly imperial voices were articulated. In that case, the colonized did not always have access to the public sphere and even if they did not only were those voices modified and sometimes suppressed they were also not included in mainstream documents. All these lead to the fact that perhaps “we have built a lot of our understanding of rhetoric and the canon of rhetoric, by focusing on and often celebrating imperial voices” (599). In my endeavour to challenge the “value systems” on which the canon of rhetoric is currently situated, I have tried to look at issues of democracy and secularism that go hand in hand in our understanding of western modernity. The rhetorical subject of India within the last hundred years, I argue, is far removed from these traditional notions of objective, free speech and has rather been immersed in religious and nationalist values. How could they not be since they were simultaneously fighting the battle of colonialism and western modernity? The fundamentalist position of the Hindutva group therefore must also be seen within the complicated matrix of establishing institutions of ‘nationalism’ in coalition with modern knowledge, which is itself considerably different from the universalizing impact of modern discourse. It is, in spite of all its negative charm, an effort to construct a discursive space that is continuously negotiating between modern and yet indigenous national identities. Indeed this is what the cultural project of religious nationalism stands in postcolonial situations as that of India and its aim is forever directed to produce a distinctly national modernity. What would be the rhetorical constitutions of such modern
subjectivities? How is this further complicated in diasporic situations? What does it mean for the postcolonial diaspora to relate to its own nationalist modernity while seated at the center of twentieth century neocolonial and imperialist structures? Looking back into the past, as religious fundamentalist groups like the RSS and HSS do with the desire to recreate what they consider ancient days of glory, should not always be interpreted as resistance to change. On the contrary, as Partha Chatterjee notes, in our attachment to the past we find means of changing our present. And in this constant effort of changing our present we see the ignominy of our postcolonial subject hood, that we are never free from our political conditions and the tentacles of western modernity. The postcolonial notions of hybridity and diaspora have much to offer in this respect. It enables to understand how rhetoric is used to haggle out some kind of a shared meaning in the quotidian activities of people who embody these culturally disjunctured states.

Takis Poulakos invites alternative approaches to the rhetorical tradition that would “consider alternative perspectives, entertain novel ways of thinking about our tradition and examining new methods of reading its texts” (3).

Looking away from history as unidirectional and comprehensive narratives, the focal point of our vision is directed towards brief, multidirectional, complex and interdependent narratives. These narratives will start featuring regularly in our classrooms, conference panels, workshops and even journal articles only when we seriously look into other rhetorical situations. There may or may not be traditions, since by tradition we seek a unified coherent history of the development of discourse, that is a legacy of western modernity. But as we accept situations of rhetorics rather than its traditions we will open our doors to all those who are different from us and yet bound by
their own social, cultural and political imperatives. We should include postcolonial theories in our syllabi, recruit international graduate students and scholars to make their histories audible within the discipline. For a comprehensive revision we should revisit our own rhetorics and visit those for the first time that are yet to be visited. Our rhetorics should be as Foucault remarks, history “in the form of a concerted carnival, a celebration of diversity and deviance, the joy of the unexpected and the comic”(140).
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From Colonialism to Globalization: The Identitarian Rhetoric of Subaltern Nationalism

When the Bharatiya Janata Party\(^1\) came to gain a large number of electoral votes in the Indian parliament in 1998, and led the country through a coalition government (National Democratic Alliance) for the next seven years, people within and outside the country were convinced about the proliferation of conservative religious ideologies in Indian nationalist politics. To some, it was not a surprise at all, especially when one took into account an escalation in the activities of two other notorious allies of BJP, namely the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Council) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS - The National Volunteer Corps) since the early 1990’s, infamous for their communal and sectarian values. Some others were outraged, as they saw it a direct and final threat to Indian constitutional practice of secular democracy. The questions in the minds of one and all, revolved around the future of secularism, and representation of India’s image to the rest of the world, whether it should now enlist itself as a religious orthodox state – a condition that has increasingly come to be associated as a unique postcolonial situation.

\(^1\) The political party that represents the Hindutva movement in the lower house of the parliament in India.
Why is religious orthodoxy so frequently and incessantly correlated with postcolonial nations? It is my concern here to uncover this relationship, nay, to see if there is really such a connection. It is also my concern here, to understand the role of religion in India quotidian experiences, to recognize the topography of discursive terrains, which might give rise to such assumptions. But the discourses I read and analyze are situated, well beyond Indian territorial politics. It mostly involves the operations of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangha (the international wing of RSS), that have continued to gather popularity and momentum within the shores of Europe and North America, more precisely among the Non-Residential Indians or the Indian diaspora in the United States. I should here make it amply clear, that I do not wish to state that all diasporic Indians in the US partake in this ideology, may be not even a majority of them. Nevertheless, there is a definite increase in the membership of HSS since 1990’s, coupled with the openings of new chapters of HSS in all major cities of the US. On an average, there are two Hindu heritage camps held by the HSS every year for youths and adults, along with many more organized for the benefits of children and adolescents. The HSS website, www.hssus.org contains most of the information about its activities and organizational structures. It is stated there, that the HSS was formally registered as a non-profit organization in the US in 1989, though one can trace its unofficial activities since about late 1960’s.

The South Asian Hindu immigrant communities I look upon are mostly educated, urban, middle-class professionals who immigrated in the US after the 1965 Immigration Act. From the mid 1980s, there has been a steady increase, in the immigration of businessmen from India and software professionals all through the 1990s. Needless to say, all these various groups initially faced the single-most challenge of reinventing their
identities in a foreign country. As the process became marginally easier, with the increasing number of incoming immigrants, and the proliferation of Indian groceries, movie rental stores and restaurants, for a majority of them, the social life continues to centre on religious education either in temple premises or through independent organizations. Consequently, the activities of the HSS have grown considerably in the US, hovering as a ‘protective umbrella’ over the Indian-American community, in the zeal of re-instigating the passion of Hindutva among them. The HSS is a religious organization with its headquarters in India (under the name of RSS), who claim to re-educate its members about the religious dimensions of Indian culture – something they lament is getting ‘lost’ under the pressures of ‘modern’ American life. In India, the RSS also bemoans the ‘loss’ of traditional Indian values and Hindu religious sentiments, ever since the constitutionalization of the country’s ethos as secular, sovereign and democratic republic. Restoration of Hindu religious sentiment thus becomes the primary motivation for these twin organizations, but in the process, they also serve the impetus for religious exclusiveness that has resulted in the intolerance of other religious groups, both in India and abroad. Interestingly, though the members of the HSS are professionally trained in the tenets of global cosmopolitanism, they have increasingly adopted Hindu nationalist ideologies as their collective political agenda, forming a private identity embedded in religious fundamentalisms. For my project here, I would like to examine the rhetorical implications of the apparently non-political discursive practices of the HSS, that I argue have led to the revival and construction of a parochial and provincial yet transnational Hindu identity in the last decade of the 20th century. I also analyze, the ways in which
members of the HSS have been interpellated into an anti-secularist discourse, which is actually promoted by its parent organization, the RSS in India.

Anti-secularist critics in India today generally agree, that the country is experiencing a ‘crisis of secularism’, meaning a challenge to the Indian state’s responsibility and mandate to preserve its ‘secular character’. The secularism in question, concerns the relation between the state and multiple religious communities of India, with their different practices. The challenge to this ‘secular’ nation state reached a crisis point, when a group of people demolished a mosque in Northern India on December 6th 1992 in the name of reviving an essential Hindu nation-state, which existed prior to British as well as Turkish-Afghan colonization of the subcontinent. Members of three major religious and political organizations, mainly the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bharatiya Janata Party led this frenzied mob. The demolition of the mosque was followed by a series of religious riots, that continue to resurface even ten years after the incident\(^2\). Apart from the aforementioned event, the year 1992 also turned out to be a crucial year when the finance minister of India decided to open Indian markets for foreign multinational corporation investments, for the first time since independence in 1947. These two major events in 1992 provide a significant basis, and starting point for my dissertation. Through my readings of HSS texts, I survey the meaningful dialectic between these two seemingly contradictory social forces operative in diasporic Hindu organizations like the HSS, namely the rise of fundamentalism and globalization.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the Indian diaspora in the US – who have predominantly been the product of post 1965 immigration from India – have increasingly assumed significant economic and professional positions, fortified mainly by the

\(^2\) Like the riots in Gujarat (a western state in India) in 2002.
developments in communication technology. Since the beginning of economic liberalization in India in 1992, Non-Resident Indians – or NRIs, as they are called – have played an active role in direct foreign investment in India, providing large capital flows for India’s sustained and rapid economic development into the 21st century, a process that has been encouraged and accelerated by the Indian government through a range of economic incentives provided to NRI investors. It would indeed be crucial, to draw attention to the symbiotic relationship that these diasporic communities maintain with the RSS, VHP and BJP parties, mainly through their overseas chapters like the HSS. The multi-layered interests served in this symbiosis includes, among others a) an immediate economic aspect, through the funds provided by these communities for various religio-political organizations both in India and the US, and b) by the protection and preservation of a national identity seen as crucial by the diasporic communities, constructed by invoking religio-mythical concepts of Hindu traditions. It is possible to argue, that a range of factors impel these communities to support and participate in these discourses and operations, including a sense of dislocation from one’s spiritual and cultural roots and anxiety about their children growing up distanced from the “ancestral/original” cultures and religions. Evidently, such factors override the ideological differences of revivalist discourses of the ‘Hindu religious right’, that might have been expected from the diasporic communities’ otherwise unrelenting immersion into capitalist economies. Before I engage into a discussion on the ramifications of these seemingly counterproductive discursive trends, I would like to trace the history of Hindutva movement in India to reveal the foundational principles and motivations that have guided the HSS so far, despite their attempts to portray it differently.

3 RSS, VHP and BJP in India and their satellite organizations in the US known by the same name.
The Story of the rise of Hindutva

Who first established the notion that India was or is to be a Hindu nation? There is a consensus, that the idea of the Hindu Rashtra (Indian nation) originated from the complex social and cultural matrix of nineteenth century India, which inspired a Hindu renaissance as well as the formation of secular nationalism, both of which find an expression in the democratic politics of India of the twentieth century. This is not a simple argument as Chetan Bhatt writes, “that Hindu or Muslim religious sensibilities were present or persistent in a national movement that was otherwise and primarily portrayed in the Nehruvian period as committed to secularism”(9). Neither can we say that indigenous varieties of Hinduism, or a ‘Hindu ethos’, were necessary as a dominant aspect of the national movement. This problematizes those linear narratives of anti-colonialism, which substantiate that, irreducible secular nationalist movements of nineteenth century India inexorably led to the democratic nation state of twentieth century. The question that I ask repeatedly in the course of this dissertation is not, whether the secular and religious trends of nationalism can be always distinguished, but how in contemporary criticisms of postcolonial religio-political discourses we continue to associate these distinctions as mutually exclusive, as individually indicative of incorporation and advancement of political modernity in postcolonial countries. In the meantime, the rapidly changing scenes of Hindu nationalism in India, have taken advantage of this (in)distinguishable factors between secular and religio-political nationalism, to extend their network overseas by subduing the political rhetoric in favour
of issues of cultural reproduction of Hindu values sustained through a self-acclaimed guardianship.

To understand this multifaceted scope of Hindutva – or Hindu nationalism as proclaimed by the RSS/HSS group – it is inevitable to explore the context of its development in India in the 1920’s. We choose the decade of 1920’s as most influential in the formation of the Hindutva ideology, since it was during this period that Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s famous book *Hindutva-or Who is a Hindu?* was published and the foundations for the RSS laid. The term Hindutva, though existent before the publication of Savarkar’s book, was most rampantly used by Savarkar for the first time, where he relates it to the ontology of Hinduness, or so to say the “beingness of a Hindu”. This Hindutva is “a neo-Sanskrit term and does not have a basis in tradition. The Sanskrit masculine suffix, ‘-tva’, appended to ‘Hindu’ creates an abstract noun, representing ‘Hinduness’. Popularized in Bengal during the 1890’s by Chandranath Basu and used by national figures such as Tilak, its contemporary usage derives largely from V.D. Savarkar” (Bhatt, 77).

Arguably, Savarkar’s nationalism echoes a trend of Indian anti-colonial activism, that was most crucially influential after the first partition of Bengal in 1905. This revolutionary nationalism was based on the legitimacy of a violent struggle, against British colonialism, and extended well beyond the Gandhian movements that gained prominence after 1920. Certain critics of Hindu diaspora movements have related the key intellectual influences on Savarkar’s version of Hindu nationalism, to the writings of both Dayanand Saraswati (1824-93) and Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) that demonstrates different strands of Hindu nationalist thoughts. Dayanand Saraswati was the founder of
the “puritanical-reformist” Arya Samaj (Aryan Society) movement in 1875 and vehemently rejected any form of idol worship, the practice of sati, caste distinctions and Hindu polytheism. He urged for a return to the reading of the four Vedas as traditionally considered sacred in many brahmanic traditions. As Dayanand believed that the Vedas were literally words of God, he advocated that all Hindu customs and practices were to be derived from the interpretation of the Vedas, and considered it the seminal texts of Hindu religious way of life. Returning to the fundamentals of Hindu religion made Dayanand’s movement extremely popular in most parts of North India, but mostly so in Punjab where its followers were “implicated in considerable violence against the Muslim and Christian minorities” (Bhatt and Mukta, 411).

Aurobindo shared some of Dayanand’s concerns, especially in his endorsement of the salience of the Vedas. However, his social philosophy was in reality composed of certain other distinctive trends. In the earlier years of his career as a social thinker and philosopher Aurobindo professed that India belonged to the Hindus from time immemorial, and that Hindus were the chosen people to whom the teachings of the Vedas were first revealed. Aurobindo started his career as a revolutionary nationalist activist, but his career took a dramatic twist when he left active political involvement and retired to Pondicherry – an idyllic town on the shores of the Indian Ocean – located in South India, where he became a spiritual teacher and interpreter of Hindu religious texts. Aurobindo Ghosh’s social philosophy was not simply informed by racialist politics. Ghosh was a prolific reader of comparative philology, and was well aware of the debates prevalent among linguists and philologists of Europe at that time on the influences of the

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4 this concept was widely interpreted and incorporated in many of Savarkar’s and later Hindutva leaders’ writings
Indo-Aryan language structures. Ghosh rejected the view that Aryans had entered the geographical territory of India from elsewhere. Debates on the original homelands of the Aryans continue to plague not only the arguments of contemporary Hindutva ideology but also remain a grave concern for classical historians of India\(^5\). This debate about the origin of the Aryans also drew attention of European cultural anthropologists during the late Victorian period, and spilled over to the beginning of twentieth century. Ghosh’s theory was based on his own interpretation of the Vedas, which he assumed portrayed that the Aryans were one of the earliest, original inhabitants of the subcontinent. This strand of thought considerably influenced the development of Hindutva politics among the Indian diaspora, and is a distinctive manifestation of Indian primordialist thinking.

Chetan Bhatt and Parita Mukta state,

Dayanand and Aurobindo represented two strands in formative Hindu nationalist thinking. However, there were many other influences on a wide-ranging Hindu renaissance, and their precise relationship with a specifically nineteenth- and turn-of-century ‘Hindu nationalism’ is subject to considerable debate. Such influences included Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-85), the Benarasi Hindi playwright, the Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattyopadhyay (1838-94), the writer K.M. Munshi and the national activists Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928) and B.G. Tilak (1856-1920), the latter a central figure in Indian Liberation Movement. Indeed, in the revival of Hinduism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it can be extremely difficult to separate any putative and distinctly Hindu nationalist currents from the numerous and fervent Hindu reform and revival movements and intellectual endeavours that were fundamentally redefining what Hinduism itself was to mean, first in a situation of imposed colonial modernity and later independence and nation building (468).

In an atmosphere already clouded by the abovementioned strands of Hindu activism, Savarkar’s version of religio-nationalist sentiments was actually quite inimitable and significant. These sentiments shared some of the trends of its predecessors,

\(^5\) I have discussed this in details in chapter three where I am particularly interested in exploring the convenient and relevant ways in which the Aryan invasion theory has been manipulated and modified throughout RSS/HSS history tradition
and encouraged contemporary delineation of Hindutva ideological underpinnings that seem to endorse without prejudice, armed insurgencies, militarism and its associated masculine aesthetics and legitimize violence in the name of ethno-nationalism.

Savarkar’s book drafted in exile, written in prison and published in 1923 gave birth to the concept of Hindutva, which gradually emerged as a politically fertile signifier and has been applied continually for the invocation of the politics of exclusive Hindu identity. Hindutva then, can be happily linked to Savarkar’s aim in providing a comprehensive definition of Hindu identity that is reflected most rigorously in the face of diasporic nationalism. But within the political upheavals of the last few decades of anti-colonial struggle in India, Savarkar’s attempt at re-defining Hindu identity basically consolidated a melange of revolutionary anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments, towards the directive of exclusive Hindu nationalism. The Hindus of Savarkar’s nation shared, not only a common nation but also a common civilization and a common race – precisely defined as commonality by blood that could only be inherited from their Vedic ancestors. And this memory of a common ancestry, never failed to evoke an emotional response for the ‘true Hindu’, specifically if it was the clarion call for national duty. The extent of Savarkar’s Hindu national boundary - stretched from the Indus river in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south - was sacred to every Hindu for it represented not only the Hindu’s Fatherland, but also his Motherland and finally and most importantly his Holyland (Savarkar, 4). A fine instance of the test of any Hindu’s dedication to this triply sanctified geographical territory arises, when crisis looms large over the nation and the Hindu is called for action. Preparing every Hindu member of its organization for such a crisis, the RSS in India and the HSS in the US have trained an impressive array of ‘paramilitary
forces’ that though displaced from the ‘Holyland’ – in case of diasporic Indians – but
nevertheless, are bound by their jati or race. Moreover, as Bhatt and Mukta argue, a
second criterion set by Savarkar to determine Hinduness often goes unnoticed. This
addendum to the primary factor of Hindu lineage, ascertains that as the heritage by blood
discerns links with Vedic-Aryan forefathers, Muslims and Christians cannot belong to the
Hindu Indian nation since their holyland is physically situated outside India. The case for
those who converted to other religions during and after Muslim and Christian conquests
of India, are addressed differently in present RSS manifestos with the rationale that they
were forcefully converted, and therefore can now be ‘willingly reconverted’. Massive re-
conversion stages are erected from time to time by the even more militant subgroups of
the RSS like the Bajrang Dal, in various parts of India, where non-Hindus from rural
India belonging to deprived economic classes are forced to revert back to Hinduism as a
way of paying the price for their ancestor’s conversion.

In the political maelstrom of 1920s, Savarkar’s conceptions of Hindu identity had
definite racial connotations. In his writings during this period, Savarkar constantly drew
comparisons between Hindus and ethnic Germans and correspondingly between Indian
Muslims and German Jews valorizing the Nazi impositions on Eastern Europe. It is
interesting, as Chetan Bhatt remarks, “whereas Hindutva did not refer directly to British
colonialism, [Savarkar’s] 1930s writings and speeches consistently did so, and in a
manner that attacked both British colonialism and Congress anti-colonialism” (106).
Savarkar’s declaration of a Hindu Nationalist Front, therefore unequivocally narrates the
rise of a far more militant conception of the Hindu nation than any other anti-colonial or
post-colonial nationalist movements have evinced in India. Savarkar’s affinities towards
Nazi Germany were well conveyed even in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the full extent of the horrors of Jewish Holocaust was revealed. This is further reflected in his enumeration of the foundational principles and policies for an aggressive Hindu militarism that stated:

- Hinduise all politics and Militarise Hindudom
- Enemy of our enemy is our best friend
- Enlightened national self-interest must be the guiding principle of foreign policy
- So long as the whole world is unjust, we must be unjust, so long as the whole world is aggressive, we must be aggressive
- Military strength behind your nation is the only criterion of greatness in the present day world
- He wins half the war who takes the offensive – who is aggressive
- Only those who are strong enough to protect not only themselves but also create fear in the minds of the enemies can talk of peace, non aggression and non-violence (102).

The Hindutva ideology, that Savarkar thus established, was not simply an overarching Indian religious tradition that we often see in the writings of Indologists and Orientalists on India. Savarkar’s displacement of the position of religion was imperative for his mostly territorial and racial conception of Hindutva. It was also contradictory, since it periodically excluded Muslims and Christians from the geographical Hinduland due to their religious practices, which were seen as an extension of their racial identities. In fact Savarkar himself could not come to a definite notion about Hindu identity and thus wrote in his book that,

The ideas and ideals, the system and societies, the thoughts and sentiments which have centred around this name [Hindutva] are so varied and rich, so powerful and so subtle, so elusive and yet so vivid that the term Hindutva defies all attempts at analysis. Forty centuries, if not more, had been at work to mould it as it is. Prophets and poets, lawyers and law givers, heroes and historians, have thought, lived, fought and died just to have it spelled thus. For indeed, is it not the resultant of countless actions – now conflicting, now commingling, now cooperating – of our whole race? Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only a spiritual or religious history of our people, but a history in full (Savarkar, 3)
This eclectic content of Hindutva, has served well for the expansion of Hindu Right network and subordination of other minorities. It profoundly influenced Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, an activist member of the Indian Independence Movement who established in 1924 the well-known male Hindu nationalist organization – the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha- or the RSS. To many, the RSS is the foundational organization for the promulgation of Hindutva ideology, that was built upon Hedgewar’s philosophy of organizational training and discipline. Even today, the RSS reflects this highly centralized structure and authority and not surprisingly seen as a militant paramilitary organization. According to some critics of the RSS, during the 1920s scheduled caste and non-brahmin movements were emerging as a serious threat to the authority of the Maharstra Hindu nationalist, who like Savarkar and Hedgewar belonged to the exclusive community of chitpavan brahmans. It was in response to the imaginary upsurge of such movements that the RSS was formed.

**Inside the Training Camps**

In the era following India’s independence, RSS became the most influential and politically successful Hindu nationalist organization. Although it is difficult to determine the number of members of the RSS in India currently, since they claim to keep no membership records, “it has about 20,000 regular branches (shakhas) and has a regular membership of several million swayamsevaks in India (estimates range from 2.5 to 6 million followers)” (Bhatt, 113). Just like its secretive policy in disclosing the accurate number of its members, RSS authoritarian structure conceals the internal workings of this
organization and the conflicts and dissension within it. It goes out of its way, to promote a solidarity among its various regional and central divisions and their projects, which as the RSS believes also symbolizes the unity of a Hindu nation. Another important factor demonstrating this organization’s obsession with withholding facts is its continual denial of being a political organization in scheme and scope.

The RSS shuns from being associated with participation in active politics. This non-political stance is related to its earlier refusal of taking part in anti-colonial movements, which it rejected in distinguishing itself from the Indian National Congress (led by Gandhi and Nehru) and other oppositions allegedly taking part in either ‘party politics’ or ‘power politics’. Disguising itself with this non-political garb, RSS literature is deeply imbued with densely metaphorical and ideological language that tries hard to bear the distinction between cultural education and active politics. The RSS’ choice to not concern itself with ‘politics’, echoes its claim to be the independent conscience of the nation, whereby any involvement in political activities is “seen to be polluting and diverting of its main aim to transform civil society and to create new Hindu Indians” (Bhatt and Mukta, 415). This non-political position however, changed fundamentally since post-independence, as the RSS and its various tributary organizations gained prominence within India and abroad. The most successful organizations created by the RSS were the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, formed in 1964 and the Bharatiya Janata Party formed in 1980 from the erstwhile existent Bharatiya Jana Sangh.

Taking its mind off from political agendas, actually gave the RSS a fine opportunity of building the strength and character of its members. For K.B. Hedgewar, the prime reason for the repeated defeats of Hindus in the hands of invaders is its failure
to unite itself against opposition. As a result, the primary objective of the RSS is to mould the Hindu consciousness through rigorous discipline and training into one of self-respect, unity and courage. The Nationalist Volunteer corps therefore emerged as a group of young male Hindu enthusiasts, who would undergo the physical and military trainings offered by the leaders of the RSS as combat strategies. As Bhatt and Mukta note in their article *Hindutva in the West*, the RSS was dedicated to recruit pre-adolescent boys for service to Hinduism and the Hindu nation. A fundamental aspect of its activities involves highly disciplined physical and pedagogic instruction, that is frequently termed as either ‘character building’ or ‘man making’ or even ‘man-moulding’ projects. All the grand sessions were meant to prepare these young Hindus both mentally and physically, so that they could safeguard the Hindu nation against any future foreign invasion, as well maintain the unity and integrity of Hindutva. There has been very little change, in the ways that Hedgewar organized his vision of the RSS in the 1940’s and the way it stands now in India. Critics have found a similarity between the organizational and disciplined structure of the RSS and “a peculiar Westernized military and boy-scout discipline” (Bhatt and Mukta 415). The training involved routine physical exercise, military drills and marches, weapons training, educational sessions on the lives of RSS leaders and Hindu kings and gods of their selection. Apart from the military training sessions, time is denoted for singing prayers to the ‘motherland’ and the RSS saffron flag (bhagwa dhwaj—flag of destiny). The RSS weapons training sessions included danda training (using a wooden staff as a weapon), khadga (sword training), vetracharma (fighting with canes), drill marching and other callisthenic exercises. Today, these same training camps also include expertise in non-Indian martial arts. Every session begins with a salute to the
saffron flag, and prayers that were initially composed in Hindi or Marathi but later changed into a neo-Sanskrit version. This new prayer composed by N.N.Bhide, distinctly glorifies Hindubhumi (Hinduland) and Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) invoking ideals of Hindu heroism, and is accentuated with the Ekatmata Stotra the unity hymn that reminds every swayamsevak of solidarity and fraternity. As the swayamsevaks are sworn in to a “lifelong oath of service and sacrifice that involved offering himself entirely – body, mind and wealth – for the preservation and progress of the Hindu nation” (Bhatt, 120), they are also required to wear the RSS uniform for any subsequent meetings and programs. It also heralded the point from which the swayamsevaks were to view the RSS flag as a guru or “true preceptor” and had to offer monetary donations to this organization as a means of paying guru dakshina – the traditional Indian custom of paying the Guru only after the completion of education. The full time moderator or the pracharak of the RSS trained these swayamsevak cadres and initiated shakhas or chapters of the organization in various provinces of India. These shakhas were primarily assigned the task of propagation of RSS ideology, and expanding its network whenever possible. It was in 1929, that the office of the sarsanghchalak (the supreme leader or ‘guide and philosopher’ of the RSS) was inaugurated and the practice of pranam or gesture of prayer to this sarsanghchalak known within the RSS community as eka chalak anuvartitva or subservience to one and only supreme leader of the organization established. Often referred to as the parampoojaniya, meaning the principle one who is to be venerated, this trend among the RSS followers and leaders contradict their continuous assertion that its leaders do not promote a cult of personality. On the contrary, the status of the sarsanghchalak is based on a narcissistic inspiration of hierarchical leadership principles
that can be compared with such ‘foreign models’ as Mussolini’s fascism. The RSS obviously, denies connection to any such motivational models and rather relates this to the traditional idea of a model Hindu family. Chetan Bhatt observes this explanation provided by the RSS as problematic in numerous ways. The Hindu family tradition, he says, does not justify a “secretive all male organization, led by older men and recruiting young boys, founded on the institutional absence of women and in which one leader holds absolute patriarchal authority and requires uncritical and devotional reverence from members” (120). This rather lends credibility to the argument that the RSS in essence is a cultish organization.

The connection between the organizing and governing principles of the RSS and HSS cannot be denied. However, it would be a gross mistake to assume that the implications and meanings of the nationalist sentiments so frequently invoked by both these organizations are same in its local and global manifestations. In fact the difference between the projects of Hindu nationalism in India and North America remains crucial to understand recent manifestations of Hindutva in the United States as against political developments in India. The purpose of Hindu nationalism in India is plain and simple. With the motive of ‘Hinduizing society’ the Hindutva group have continued its operations in India through its three main organizational branches, the BJP for its political enterprises, the VHP as a cultural wing and finally the RSS which is the “ideological backbone” and “provides grass-roots cadre” for the Hindu nationalists (Rajagopal, 468). The master plan of this project involves aggressive and violent campaigns against Muslims and more recently Christians to “mobilize support and terrorize dissidents into submission” (Rajagopal, 468). Not being able to execute this plan
due to a number of reasons ranging from the rise of minority assertions to the protests of regional and secular political parties in India, “Hindu nationalism wavers between a politics of compromise and capitulation, and campaigns of increasing brutality. At the same time it presents itself as investor-friendly to the international community and appears as an advocate of market liberalization” (Rajagopal, 468). In the US this same Hindutva nationalism speaks of the cultural greatness and tolerance of the Hindu society, which asserts its distinction especially as it tries to accommodate its minority status within a racially diverse society. By making a permanent place in this multicultural society, the HSS in North America and its most affluent community members can exert a great deal of influence over their less prosperous counterparts in India. As the HSS realizes the potential of this relationship they have accumulated all their resources towards reaping benefits from these uneven yet favourable affiliations. In the opinion of Arvind Rajagopal, though the activities of the HSS and other Hindu nationalist organizations differ considerably from their parent organizations, in India they join under a consolidated view of what Hindutva stands for and this is especially suited to the needs of globalization. Gaining currency through both “cultural rejuvenation” and “national distinction” the Hindutva movement in contemporary times, offers the protection of an age-old identity in a newly uncertain environment, while in many ways advancing the entry of transnational business interests, often at the expense of indigenous interests. For those in the US, Hindu nationalists at home articulate the political interests of a long-suffering Hindu community until recently marginalized in its own country. For those in India, the expansion of Hindu nationalist organizations in the US and elsewhere in the West is testimony to the strength and power of Hindu values, and affirms the importance of their own mission. An unacknowledged politics of location operates within these differing perceptions (469).
Hence, what does an ideologically militant Hindu Right do to persuade Indian Americans? Before recognizing the range of activities and strategies that have been specifically devised by the Hindutva nationalists to spread their words of fire among young Indian-Americans we should first take a look at the first generation affluent middleclass Indian diaspora who have so far done a good job of maintaining a fine balance between a transnational Hindu identity and the Indian, local and regional identity. It is indeed an anomaly as most critics of Hindutva would agree, since under no circumstance does the US encourage its citizens and residents to participate in multiple nationalist loyalties. The resultant diasporic-ethnic identity therefore does not establish a simple binary and negotiations between longing for homeland and adversities of new immigrant cultural experiences. The motif of the Hindutva of the US as Biju Matthew and Vijay Prashad explains is hidden in its style – a unique “Yankee Hindutva” – which is “as much a response to US racism through the provision of support structures for Indian Americans who are at a social loss in the US, as it is to the growth of Hindu nationalism at home” (518). Yankee Hindutva therefore is fundamentally a reaction to the anxieties of immigrants’ experiences and the tensions of diasporic life. A reconstitution of the Hindu-American life comes foremost in their agenda with the corollary of providing support to the Hindu Right faraway in the homeland. Mathew and Prashad enumerated three major reasons for the adoption of Hindu American identity initiated by first-generation immigrants and later followed up by their children and others in the community. To begin with, like most immigrants from Asia and Africa, Indian Americans suffer from guilty sentiments for leaving behind their own countries that continue to suffer from depravity and lack of resources. It is here that the new immigrant
tries to make meaningful contribution by sending money to the homeland as means of exonerating their own guilt for deserting a land that so needed them and also genuinely offering to change conditions back home. Better acclaimed as long-distance nationalism, the immigrants are sometimes unaware of the consequences of their ‘little help’, which they believe is used by local organizations in India for good community works. As a way to act in accordance with this diasporic generosity, the Hindu Right organizations in both India and abroad have set up numerous local and community-based organizations who assure the best use of the money of Indians abroad. Rarely do these Indian-Americans come to notice the real usage of their fat checks and it holds true that only a small fraction of the Indian immigrants in the US actually support the activities of organizations that openly endorse paramilitary violence.

The job of deciphering therefore, what the real purpose of HSS and RSS activities surmised for Indian-Americans is not easy. It is especially not uncomplicated when these same Indian-Americans attempt to re-invent their cultural environment in the foreign land from what they see as not only diametrically different but also an “ahistorical” American culture. Outside the workplace and school – areas that have more commercial and learning values than platforms for social interaction – the immigrant parents are always scrutinizing the prospects of young Indian Americans becoming increasingly Americanized. The sexual life of these young people are most often examined and deviation from the classic model of Indian social life is looked upon as an untoward American influence. Daughters remain the single most worry for these immigrant parents who continue to believe in the social docile position of their young Indian women and in an agonizingly alarmed state of mind they turn to sources of education on the dharma of
Hindu-Indians or what their position and role should be within and outside the Hindu household or society. This provides an opportune avenue for the Hindu Right like the HSS to disseminate its ideology. At the well-resourced website and chapters of the HSS one can find books, articles and other pedagogical materials for the education of the Non-Residential Hindu Indian community. For instance, a recent article published by the online journal Hindunet entitled “NRI’s Flock to RSS Camp to Become Global Hindus” describes how Non Residential Indians (Indians living abroad) are increasingly participating in conferences organized by the RSS and the HSS in India. The article emphasizes that the underlying reason for this evolving interest in Hindu values can easily be located in the fact that Indians still find themselves isolated in the foreign land and the quest for a cultural identity remains insatiable. As Shambhu Shastry – a 42-year-old electrical engineer from Boston – states in the article “an Indian is never quite accepted abroad. Both young and the old are looking for their identity in a sea of Western culture…The Hindu family faces many challenges in the Western world. If an understanding of your religion and culture is not strong you will be sucked into the materialistic culture” (2). Looking closely at Mr.Shastry’s comment three main threads of dissatisfaction can be traced, The first resonates a constant state of discontent on being an ‘outsider’, the second reflects on the polarization of the East/West cultural binaries and the third draws attention to the sharp difference between the so called spiritual cultures of Asia with the ‘materialistic’ tendencies of the West. Mr. Shastry’s viewpoint is by no means an aberration, rather it implies the ideological foundations of organizations like the HSS and explains its success in constructing a persuasive discourse where such despondent feelings are pivotal in pleading the case for a conservative Hindu community
outside India. This is not to say that negotiating one’s identity in a foreign land is unproblematic, however the matter is further complicated when organizations like the HSS employ this as an opportunity to reorient oneself with traditional and orthodox religious ideologies which in turn remains intolerant of minorities in the ‘homeland’.

Critiques of the Hindu right ideology argue that there are certain models of US Orientalism that renders India as a space of extreme spirituality. As Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad explain in their article *The Protean forms of Yankee Hindutva*, “This Orientalism has a long history that begins with Emerson, who draws from European Orientalism, but then finds its own feet in the US reception of Vivekananda in 1893” (524). According to them, even extreme assimilationists within the US allow Indian-Americans to have some measure of autonomy in the domain of the spiritual, which comes to mean a distinctive religious space, the material form of which is usually a temple or other religious spaces constructed through religious shrines or texts. This form of orientalism is appropriated by the leaders of the Indian-American community – most of whom have no formal training in theology – to make the passage to the religious as a necessary content of Indian-American life as opposed to mainstream Euro-American models. These immigrants, most of whom are professionals living in white middle-class suburbs, often fear potential ‘Americanization’ leading to the loss of what they perceive as their ‘original’ cultural identity. As the revival of the Hindu right in India began to accelerate from the 1980’s, many of the diasporic Indians looked upon this revival as an opportune moment to extend alliances while negotiating their racial identities in the foreign land. It also served an excellent basis to illustrate my objective of how the HSS in
the US creates a discourse of ‘cultural identity’ to persuade its audience in foregrounding a rhetorical space that endorses an insular and self-sufficient religious ideology.

This biased point of view of the Hindu Right in the US differs from its versions in India mainly since it poses itself in the US as the only alternative to the complicacies of assimilation in a foreign country while in India it is often an implicit conservative insurgence. The HSS, which is the apparatus of the Hindu right in the US, thus operates on the dual scheme of ensuring a cultural ‘reproduction’ of Hinduism, albeit with exclusivity, among South Asian diasporic communities whereas invoking a majority religious politics in India. What emerges, as the principle figure in the advancement of these rhetorical constructions is the role and agency of the audience. The HSS and RSS both in India have been successful so far to persuade a large group of people in believing in this exclusive religious politics. However, the means of persuasion implemented in India and abroad (within the US) have been significantly different, based on the demographic difference in the audience constitution. This dichotomy in the HSS operations at home and abroad entails a reconfiguration of the essential principles of its ideology that provides a fascinating instance of the study of rhetoric and ideology and how both their success hinges upon the construction of audience. In other words, examining the ways in which the Hindu right ideology is adapted and translated in various cultural contexts demonstrate the versatility of audience identity formulations and the role of Hindutva ideological rhetoric in constructing such variants.

Persuasion is central to the construction of diasporic religious identities. The persuasive techniques implemented by the Hindu religious organizations distinguish between ‘intellectual’ and ‘physical’ training, illustrating a range of rhetorical strategies
deployed for the HSS ideological inculcation. The HSS endeavour for ideological inculcation is bifurcated into ‘intellectual’ and ‘physical’ processes. Intellectual inculcation that in HSS terms is known as ‘Boudhik’ inspiration concerns itself with preserving unity among the Hindus across the globe, of administering short courses on Hindu history while illuminating militant, revolutionary contents of such historical narratives, composing quasi-religious songs for invocation of nationalist sentiments and finally valorizing ground-breaking achievements by Indians in fields of science and technology compared and juxtaposed with biographies of prominent HSS leaders. A cursory glance through all these materials exposes deployment of various rhetorical tropes of which I mainly discuss the manipulation of the tropes of myth and history in this project. Primarily, the motif of action surfaces as the touchstone for all HSS activities and loosely veils their ideological project. Sometimes explicitly stated this motif of action denotes the present as preparation for a future time of combat. Circulating throughout its ideological representations, action creates the need for strict discipline and regulation, to reorganize the HSS members around a neo-Hindu society. It is precisely in this preparation for action that the Hindutva movement gains its militant character. Boudhik resources help to distinguish between a glorious Hindu past and the ignominy suffered by Hindus now in their pitribhumi or fatherland in the hands of Muslims and Christians. This present state of deprivation and humiliation can be overthrown through unifying Hindus all over the world and preparing them for conflict with their adversaries. As a part of such intellectual preparation one has to understand the “Hindu history” of India, reiterate the prarthana or prayers in praise of religio-national icons believe in myths and conflate them with historical narratives, commemorate the dedication of HSS/RSS
leaders who worked relentlessly to make these actions possible in the past. In short, the HSS wants to persuade its audience to believe that they are perpetually living in a moment of ‘crisis’ and that subverting it should be a unanimous goal for all Hindus across the globe. As if in response to the founding father of RSS – V.D. Savarkar’s rallying cry to “Hinduise all politics and militarize all Hindudom” HSS ideology evolves to prepare an army of Hindus who can successfully retain the utopia of “Hindudom” both within their pritribhumi and away from it.

Rhetorically, Boudhik appeal is an appeal to one’s intellect or buddhi in Sanskrit—a form of cognitive approach. This emotional yet logical appeal is conjured among the HSS community is two major ways. The first involves a familial bond that binds together all members of the HSS. The HSS hierarchy works much in the mode of a traditional Indian family with the Sanghchalak or organization leader at the apex and then the various organization chapters or shakhas headed by the sakhapracharak or branch leader, followed by the other members. The entire community is known as the Sangh Parivar literally “the Sangh Family”. Members of the family are sworn to remain loyal to the Sangh mission and agenda and the Sangh in return promises to protect and keep the spirit of Hindutva alive among its followers. The second form of Boudhik appeal entails distinguishing between karmabhoomi that is land of work- America, and pitribhoomi or land of birth- India. A simplistic version of it would be appealing to the sense of dislocation or being away from the land of their ancestors. But there is more to it than that. For the post 1980’s high profile Non Residential Indians, which also comprise of wealthy technocrats of the Indian American diasporic demography the appeal lies in “anxieties of the migrant’s experience” as Matthew and Prasad argues. Locating such
anxieties predominantly in US multiculturalism and racist/orientalist spaces as we have discussed earlier in this chapter, Matthew and Prasad conclude that the Hindu right fashions protean forms to disseminate its core agenda i.e. “to constitute a Hindu community that is a faraway supporter of the Hindu right in India”(518). The recourse to an array of rhetorical formulations and semantic devices like maxims, aphorisms, syllogisms, hyperboles, synecdoche, metonymy to name a few are used to produce a vast set of neo-Vedantic and neo-Sanskritic values and meanings that establish the basic premise of Hindutva ideological configuration and enables to incite their audience’s passion.
CHAPTER 2

Gods in the Backyard: HSS and the Reorientation of Hindu Myths

Introduction

Within the diverse linguistic and social practices of India, there exists a cohesive force uniting the Hindu majority through shared religious beliefs and ethical principles that is most vividly articulated in the rich network of myths which forms the backbone of Hindu religion and culture. Even now, in most everyday household practices in India myths are communicated orally, chiefly through a tradition of storytelling, along with the enactment of religious rituals and customs that ensure the continuity of these myths through generations, many of them providing moral guidance to its audience. In a hierarchical social setting as that of conservative Hindu society, myths are probably one of those rare elements of religious literature that are made readily available to the commoners irrespective of class, caste or gender. Perhaps it is this accessibility of myths and their universal reception across the country that also makes them the best possible instruments of ideological inculcation.

The crux of mythical formulation is that they are delivered and followed. And this might go a long way in explaining the proliferation of mythic narratives in the politics of contemporary Hindu fundamentalism. There is certainly something in the making
of the myth and its communication that makes it irresistible as a persuasive technique.

I would like to suggest in this essay that myth functions explicitly at times, and implicitly at others, as a rhetorical edifice through which convictions of Hindutva\textsuperscript{6} are filtered and molded.

**Myths Past and Present**

For the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangha (HSS)\textsuperscript{7} in North America, it is especially important to represent a unified Indian national experience, often substituted for a Hindu experience that can easily be translated under diasporic contexts. In recent years therefore, HSS has undertaken a rigorous method of disseminating knowledge on Hindu history, society, culture and practices within its target groups through regularly organized meetings. Through all this, the HSS proposes to transmit messages to awaken the Hindus across the world, as its mission statement illuminates – “Hindu Jage Vishwa Jage” – in the awakening of the Hindus the world will awaken. In my reading of the HSS texts, including pedagogical documents, pamphlets, brochures and other print materials obtained from their websites and various chapter offices, I have come across HSS attempts at stimulating and reorienting Hindu religio-political sentiments for its specific diasporic audience. These attempts, I argue, can be seen as revivalist strategies on part of the HSS project to reconstruct what I shall call here

\textsuperscript{6} The term Hindutva was constructed by V.D. Savarkar – the founder of the HSS/RSS group. The concept originally coincided with the concept of Hinduism meaning people who followed the Hindu religious principles. In his book *Who is a Hindu?* Savarkar first distinguished Hinduism from Hindutva associating the former as 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. The subsequent Hindu nationalist movement began calling themselves of the Hindutva origin referring to the racial identity established by Savarkar.

\textsuperscript{7} Roughly translated as Hindu Volunteer Corps and commonly known as the HSS.
‘exclusivist rhetoric’. This policy, implemented through rhetorical constructions of signs, images and myths, as we shall examine here, eventually paves the way for militant religious nationalism.

The (re)production of myths by the HSS to promulgate a neo-Hindu order especially among the diasporic audience in North America sheds light on the cultural influences that shape this complex rhetorical situation. Therefore, it is significant that we first understand the complexities of Hindu myth production and its consumption by the expatriate audience. In spite of the assumptions of cultural ‘purity’ through which they are perceived, Indian myths are actually a conglomeration of stories from Vedic lore that have also been influenced by narratives from various folk traditions. Indeed, it is a cross-fertilization of ideas resulting from such influences that has lead to the emergence of various theisms like Vaishnavism (followers of Vishnu), Shaivism (followers of Shiva) and later, the development of a well defined pattern of worship of goddesses as opposed to the classical all male pantheon. All these subcultures have woven their own network of myths that promote devotion and an unquestioning self-surrender to a chosen deity, and the advocacy of the dictum that only through devotion can one lead a meaningful life and eventually break the karmic cycle of death and rebirth. Indian myths are also exceptional in that they are constituted in cycles of time so that the recurrence of myths is assured. Unlike Western concepts of religious creation being a unique linear event, Hindu philosophy renders creation into a continual process of re-creation, where the universe periodically emerges, and after having gone through a cycle of four ages (yugas) comes to an end by being absorbed into the cosmic void. After a period of quiescence however, creation commences
afresh. Myths in all forms incorporate these stories of creation and recreation along with preservation of the universe, and its eventual destruction, illustrating that nothing is really unique or stable, and that all things come, go and return again. A certain kind of moral ambivalence permeates Hindu mythical figures, be it gods, demons or even humans in spite of their neat integration into a cosmic system where every creature, animate or inanimate play a vital role. It is this ambivalence that is rhetorically exploited by these religious revivalist groups to create what are ironically, rigid and binaristic moral contexts.

The preservation of such a universe is not easy as the myths narrate to us. From its inception, rivals of the gods have been in conflict with humans and the gods themselves, an ongoing conflict that has remained unresolved over the centuries. Antagonists of the gods, including human and demonic ones, therefore appear in disguise throughout the ever-revolving cycle of time, and demand power over either the gods themselves or over the humans. Since the gods are forced to acknowledge the power of their devotees, and since most of these antagonists accumulate credits of good karma by following long years of severe asceticism, their wishes are mostly fulfilled. Furthermore, in a lot of cases it is the wishes of the devotees that limit or destroy the power of the gods. Interestingly though, not all of these characters are painted in negative hues. Rather, the battle between the gods and non-gods can end either way, often providing crucial lessons on misfortunes, crucial follies in decision-making, the impermanence of power and other moral and political insights.

More recently, in the 20th and 21st centuries, these old myths have evolved with newer characters and newer histories. A.L. Dallapiccola states “The unique elasticity
of the Hindu pantheon allows for the creation of new deities…These new figures are
effortlessly incorporated into the families of either Shiva or Vishnu. In keeping with
the traditional, cyclical concept of time, gods who were once ‘out of fashion’ are
rediscovered, while others who were popular in the past no longer play a prominent
role.”(77). At the same time in recent years, Hindus in India have also seen a
proliferation of popular religious art in forms of calendar prints, film and TV
productions and mythological comic books. Some of these mediums have substituted
traditional religious icons with more contemporary political figures and leaders, who
are now widely revered and set on the same platform with Ram, Krishna, Vishnu or
Shiva. Within newer economic and technological infrastructures, it is fascinating to
observe how the culture of deification within Indian society becomes interchangeable
with secular contexts, predominantly those of sports, popular culture and national and
regional politics.

As Dallapiccola writes “One of the most striking examples is a painted scroll
from Bengal representing the life of [India’s former prime minister] Mrs. Indira
Gandhi. In its last scene the assassinated Mrs. Gandhi is depicted ascending to heaven,
welcomed by all the gods, sages and divine beings. This is no surprise since during her
lifetime Mrs. Gandhi saw herself and was perceived as, a form of Durga, the slayer of
the anti-god Mahisha”(77). Technological advancements coupled with India’s sudden
surge into liberal economic policies in the 1990’s have also ushered in benefits of low-
cost satellite television where we now have multiple channels on religious education
as well as extremely popular series on the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. As
Sunday morning prime time slot of Indian television became reserved for such shows,
it also provided a family occasion to gather around the set not only for religious education, but also for entertainment. Such mythic tales never fail to attract a diverse audience offering education (for the elderly who found it auspicious that Ram and Krishna could now perform their miracles within the living room) and entertainment for the young (who found scintillating resemblances between the wars in the epics and the various quest themes of video games). Advancement in computer applications too have also led to new dimensions in the spread of religious education, where mythical texts are now being re-printed with colorful pictures of gods and goddesses (with some rare ones that have faces of popular movie actors and actresses superimposed) printed by local presses solely set up for the purpose. Ubiquitous throughout India, Dallapiccola states, the myths’ “present day imagery has lost none of the vitality of the past, as is demonstrated by the ever increasing presence of modern religious art and everyday advertisements alluding to mythological incidents Classical forms have however, been slightly adjusted to suit modern taste in facial features, costume and color scheme”(78). All in all, the ‘business’ of myths has flourished in a manner that has itself arguably achieved mythic status in its widespread publication and distribution.

In fact, given these current socio-economic trends, it is not at all surprising that myths still constitute a large part of Indian religious education. Since Hinduism does not provide a single authoritative scriptural text or a specific set of religious guidelines (as is the case with Christianity, Islam and Judaism), it is the myriad of myths that form the vast body of religious literature integrating a range of instructional measures. It also lends a certain flexibility in the structure of religious education, leaving it
mostly to individual audience members to decide upon what values to derive from it. The adaptability of myths to contemporary times and its exceptional functionality makes it a highly popular pedagogic method, which always retains loose ends and questions. It is this ambiguous characteristics of myth that makes it playful and yet a widely followed body of instructions devoid of dogmatic dicta. Part of the fluidity of such receptions of myths can be attributed to its inherent semiological structure as Roland Barthes explains in his essay “Myth Today”. Partly however, it depends on the cultural interpretations of myths, and as I have attempted to describe above, especially so in an urban cosmopolitan setting. In the following sections I explore how these myths have been incorporated within the HSS ideology as part of its fundamentalist propaganda, where they considerably lose their flexibility. The myths that the HSS conjure are relatively rigid, focusing on epics that are considered supremely authoritative texts within the organization. Although most of these myths are still transmitted orally, occasionally in informal settings, they are motivated by a singular agenda and repeated often through various rhetorical practices to fulfill the goals of the organization. In the process, eventually the old myth dies, its initial chain of signification is disregarded and is substituted with signs whose links with the original myth is rather tenuous.

**Within the Structure of the Myth**

Hindu myths disseminated by the HSS include verbally constructed narratives as well as a conglomeration of visual images and practices. For the most part, these narratives comprise of invigorating tales of religious nationalism. The models that are set up for emulation 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 and Rana Pratap and Vivekananda and mythical characters such as Krishna, Arjun, Ram and Sita. Furthermore, the morals 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 towards 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 supplemented by 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 Indian struggle for freedom against 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 interest of our analysis here these distinctions are crucial, it is important to bear in mind that the cultural activities conducted by the HSS daily are inclusive of both verbal and non-verbal practices. It is also significant to note that most of these activities, verbal as well non-verbal ones are intended to promote a narrative of Hindu order of life, imposing upon its audience an edifice of values and actions that constitute Hinduism for the HSS.

In his essay “Myth Today”, Roland Barthes emphasizes that “myth is a second-order semiotic system”, by which he means that the assortment of signifier, signified and signs in the myth is at once an end product of a linguistic system that also serves as a foundation for its mythic interpretation. What unfolds according to Barthes is that a lateral shift “in the formal systems of first significations” results in providing “raw
material” for the myth. Myth thus collects its data through this already existent semiological chain to transform it into a new and bigger system of signification. The semiologist, Barthes indicates, no longer has to take into account the details of the initial “linguistic schema” but needs to know “its total term, or global sign, and only in as much as this term lends itself to myth”(115). Myth thus conforms to a meta-language where the sign from the first semiological order becomes the signifier for the mythical construction and performs a dual function of both pointing out and notifying – “…it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us”(117).

The semiological structure of myth thus comprises of a fixed signified that Barthes refers to as the “concept” which is open to access for a variety of signifiers. This is crucial, since the repetition of the “concept” through different signifiers or “forms” is precious to the mythologist, “it allows him to decipher the myth” (120). This ambiguity in the structural construction of myths lends it a transient status by which it comes into being as and whenever necessary. The “myths” I am about to discuss here can be organized along two planes that I will name here as primary and secondary. Within the primary plane of mythological constructions, for instance, I shall discuss selected episodes from the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, the respective implications of these epics and the characters of their protagonists, along with the messages of Dharma and Karma as explicated in HSS texts. Within the secondary order of these mythic creations, I shall discuss how these popular episodes of Hindu myths are deployed to accentuate the publicity mechanisms of the ideology of Hindutva.
To help in our understanding of the configurations of the primary myth it is imperative that we revisit the structure of the myth that Barthes states as unstable. According to Barthes, it is the recognition of the modes of correlation between mythic forms and mythic concepts that gives a reader of myths a unique positionality with regards to the attempt of deciphering the myth. He explains, the ‘concept’ is a constituting element of myth and “that the relation which unites the concept of myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of deformation” (120). This is because the mythic signifier as discussed earlier is already existent in a former linguistic chain and its meaning is already outlined and as such can appear “only through a given substance” (120). The “deformation” takes place as the mythic signifier loaded with the ‘meaning’ of its previous semiological chain offers resistance to the mythic concept, that eventually robs the signifier of its original meaning and history. This deformation is not however, as Barthes suggests a complete obliteration. It is not so, since it in fact prepares the mythic signifier for a new order of signification, to empty itself earlier only to be ready to re-prepare for its association with the new mythic concept. In this process however, the mythic signifier is forever trapped in its dual role as being a “perpetual alibi, for the meaning is always there to present the form, the form is always there to outdistance the meaning” (123).

All this is to say that in the process of deciphering the meaning of the myth one can choose to focus on the signifier either as empty or full, or for that matter look upon the entire structure of myths as a form of “ambiguous significations”. In this latter version of reading myths, the distortive power of myth is best exemplified where it naturalizes the story of the myth only to make it both true and unreal at once. It is
here, as Barthes succinctly suggests that we reach “the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (129). Additionally, it also establishes the chain that conjoins semiology, myth and ideology.

The ideological schema of Hindutva is amply illustrated in the coalition between primary and secondary chains of myths. By way of its propaganda of Hindutva, the HSS establishes and utilizes mythical narratives from the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses to construct an array of neo-mythical narratives that well serves its purpose of ideological inculcation among its followers. 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 continuously within the Hindutva ideology. Widely believed as the incarnations of Lord Vishnu – the preserver within the Hindu trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu and Maheshwar (the destroyer) – Ram was born roughly around 5000 BCE and Krishna approximately 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 into 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 Ravan from Lanka (modern day Sri Lanka). Then Ram, and his allies head out to rescue his wife and to destroy the ten-headed Ravan. In order to recover his wife from the hands of the demon king Ravan, Ram wages a war against Ravan, 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. As Biju Matthew and Vijay Prasad state, this epic has been “utilized for the recreation for Hindu religious and nationalist iconography in militant ways” (527). 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” (527). The following renditions of the epic, which gained popularity among groups like the HSS in the 1990’s, represent the same Ram as an aggressive warrior. While the former image as shown in figure (i) 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 as in figure (ii) is endowed with the prowess of “a lone vengeful figure unleashing weapons” (527). This modification of Ram exemplifies perfectly, mythic transformation on the secondary 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 who took up arms for defending his nation, wife and dharma is also mirrored in the role of Krishna – the hero of the epic Mahabharata, and similar processes at second order myth making is also at work here. While both 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 complex and morally ambivalent personality,

his 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 cowherd’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 (Dallapiccola, 36).

But there are limits to this story, as the duality of Krishna’s character illustrates most strikingly. Even as a child bestowed with divine qualities, 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 childlike impishness that is expected of him. He is playful, mischievous, disobedient at times and yet simple and innocent. However, this simplicity quickly gave way to superhuman strength whenever he was 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 Krishna’s 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 in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. This duality of Krishna’s character, the apparent simplicity and charm and other endearing qualities juxtaposed with the determination
and sternness that underscores 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 – provides a significant subset of the religious, cultural and political aspirations of the HSS. Articulating the latent martial potential in every Hindu therefore becomes the primary objective of all HSS propaganda. The HSS thus has been active in summoning up the feelings of militant nationalism, of inspiring its audience to the realization that they too can perform the aforementioned dual roles whenever their country or dharma so required.

The act of transformation from the benign to the aggressive warrior is rhetorically represented as an eye-opener, indicating the discrepancies that lurk within the character of the Hindus and their enemies. Just as indicated, 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 HSS reinforces its establishment of the second order of mythological plane with the purpose of mobilizing its audience towards defending an imaginary Hinduhood. In other words, the HSS ideologues use the primary myths of Ram and Krishna to re-construct narratives of war and action replacing the primary mythical characters with an arbitrary selection of Hindu rulers, freedom fighters and founding fathers of the HSS/RSS group.
The Divine and the Other

Abik Roy and Robert C. Rowland claim that at the core of all Hindu nationalist rhetoric one can trace a 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 “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”(8). Every society, as such, is exposed to narrative sequences that establish behavioral patterns expected to be followed by its members. It is worth asking why under ‘normal’ and ‘daily’ circumstances, these myths lead a largely inactive life and are usually contained within rhetorical practices in the private sphere of household religious performances. And yet, the resourcefulness of these apparently dormant practices within the quotidian private sphere is cleverly exploited by the religious 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 the myth 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 in the hands of foreign colonizers such as the Muslim 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 onto the national public sphere is therefore part of a rhetorical aggression that underlies the militant religious nationalism that can only construct itself in terms of a historicized cultural polemic.

Both in the public and the private articulation of the myth however, as Roy and Rowland point out the representation of the “powerful enemy” remains constant. Within the HSS discourse moreover, the image of the enemy is frequently blurred by a constant shift in its position. Rather than erecting the icon of a tangible enemy with legitimate grounds for grievance, the HSS constructs 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 RSS\(^8\) 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 Canada and the US provides new immigrants spaces to assert their cultural traditions. This is the political juggling act forever executed by the HSS, and this is founded on its claim as a predominantly cultural organization with no ties with Indian national politics, a claim which is hard to accept at face value.

The contemporary stories of war and sacrifice that continually resurface within the HSS discourse, needless to say, display a close affinity with the wars fought by

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\(^8\) Rashtryia Swayamsevak Sangha, translated as The National Volunteer Corps – the mother organization for HSS based in India, and founded in 1927 during India’s anti-colonial struggle.
both Ram and Krishna. The ultimate motive for such narrative is to invoke a sense of religious and cultural ignominy suffered at the hands of followers of other religions and thus to install the logic of revenge. The dissemination of knowledge of such ignominy takes place through biographies of great Hindu rulers and leaders, lessons on Hindu dharma and heritage, tales on the contribution of Hindus in science and mathematics. Through each of these rhetorical practices the HSS keeps its purpose alive and raises it to almost mythic proportions for a successful inculcation of the Hindutva ideology.

For example, Balagokulam, a center for Hindu children’s education founded by the HSS is devoted to the cause of raising kids in the image of Lord Krishna 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 website stridently proclaims, “every child has that spark of divinity within”. Therefore, “Balagokulam is a forum for Hindu children in North America to discover and manifest that divinity” enabling an appreciation of their cultural roots. The teaching methods practiced by the teachers 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 pedagogical 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” (www.hssus.org).

The reconstruction of the conditions of Krishna’s childhood (as in the Balagokulam centers) thus exemplifies the recreation of the context of myths so that the myth itself can be reproduced. In other words, the complex relationship between the text and the audience of the epics is translated through the act of creating not entirely new ‘myths’, but by ascertaining a reproduction of past and popular ‘myths’ within a foreign cultural setting. In common parlance, it is usually assumed that all Hindu children growing up in India has 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 joys of childhood. A reading of the texts on Balagokulam’s mission and goals, intriguingly reveals not the idyllic bliss of 5th century BC rural India, but a training institution closely resembling other HSS organizations and their methods of Boudhik (intellectual) persuasion as they are constructed in contemporary North America. 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, 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 being 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 Prtivi Raj 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 are colored by qualities that are considered as quintessentially Hindu-istic by the HSS. These characters are united by their collective inclination towards 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. By tracing the roots of some of these qualities to the characteristics of the mythical figureheads of Ram and Krishna, the theme of war and sacrifice also squarely fits 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 ‘war mongering’ 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 by their HSS depiction.

The first among these personalities describes in the HSS literature comes Swami Vivekananda, a great philosopher and spiritual leader of 19th century India, and a social reformer who also worked to liberate the society from 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 contemporary colonial condition. In the HSS publications, Vivekananda stands apart as a Hindu preacher more than a philosopher and social reformer. Vivekananda’s attempts to uphold the spiritual legacy of India also 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 - to profess and promote not only Hindu values but 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 came around when she met Vivekananda in Ireland. Born of Irish parents, Nivedita (or Ms. Margaret Noble) was so profoundly impressed by the teachings and philosophy of Vivekananda that she joined the Mission founded by
Vivekananda 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 (www.hssus.org).

While both Vivekananda and Nivedita’s ‘dharma’ entailed spreading the tenets of Hinduism, the subsequent stories from the ‘biographies’ section of HSS Boudhik (Intellectual) education for its members continue with an emphasis on the oppressions of the Mughal rulers. Narrating the stories of Pritviraj 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 for revenge was thwarted in the hands of their Muslim captors, and hence the sense of failure looms heavily over these tales. Such thwarted actions thus become the site of invocation of feelings of ‘revenge’ that might do justice to the death of the Hindu rulers. To implement them 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 are hyperbolically described so as to provide supernatural explanations for historical phenomena. Living a life in between the real and the imaginary, these chronicles of violence embody a life partially constituted of truth and partially of myth. Every story only strengthens the conviction within the HSS 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 channelised into neo-mythic tales of war. The cycle of myth is further kept alive through passages like the following from the *Bhagavad Gita* where Krishna stridently proclaims to return to the world everytime Hindus face a crisis of ‘dharma’: “whenever 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 has taken upon itself to provide the infrastructure
necessary to conclude the tasks of Krishna. The cycle of myths and re-myths and neo-
myths 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 sight of a sixteenth century mosque), in Ayodhya in India, shila
pujan (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 (474).

The HSS 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:

Has 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 (www.hssus.org).

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” (www.hssus.org). It also explains “how the system of Sati and child
marriage came in to 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.” 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.

**Between the Mythic and the Mystic**

In the writings of 19th century German Indologists such as Max Mueller, a certain romanticized and essentialized image of Hinduism and Hindu religious texts emerged that have been readily incorporated into the HSS 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 along with tales of Hindu leaders involved during 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 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 post-industrial Western societies. Whenever the HSS propaganda necessitates
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-cum-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 5-7)

In the abovementioned HSS critique of the nature of “Western democracies”, the onus of criticism is directed towards 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 the HSS propaganda. Simplistically speaking, according to HSS agenda, all capitalist systems necessarily involve a mad scramble for material desires, which can only lead to despondency in the end. Publicizing this notion becomes doubly crucial for a demographic group who has left their place of ancestral origin for better material opportunities abroad. Such an
audience is always reminded of their critical situation, the complexities associated with it and that their loyalties are always at a threat of being misdirected.

In a way, the success of HSS propaganda is contingent upon the widespread publicity of ‘crisis’ or ‘fear’ (of 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 HSS 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 re-colonization of one’s ‘culture’ and of the sacrosanct private domain that has remain unblemished all through the history of colonial India, HSS texts re-signify 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 become overwhelming, the HSS proclaims, many Westerners take recourse to the spiritual solace of yoga and other traditional rituals and practices. Similarly, the 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 harmonise 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 8-9).

Elsewhere 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 2-3).

The very notion of Indian spiritualism here is mythologized, 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 myth is contingent upon a similar construction of certain North American socio cultural practices. If each of these myths constructed in HSS texts could successfully invoke the sense of injustice and patriotism among their audience, then we will find ourselves confronted with a group of people who are charged with a historically entrenched sense of injustice. Imposing upon itself the rhetoric of marginalization, which becomes doubly significant in the diasporic context, the HSS articulates its 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 *pitrībhumi* (fatherland) and *karmabhumi* (land of work) in fine becomes rhetorically critical, as these immigrant groups align it with the binary of the private and public domains.
CHAPTER 3

Who wants to be a History Expert?

Revisionist Historiographies of Anti-Colonial Hindutva

From the outset, the agenda for a renewed version of Indian historiography by the HSS indicated a pay-back time against colonialism, multiculturalism and secularism. The writing of Indian history accordingly became an important site for political struggle, a venue for the exposition and subversion of colonial and post-colonial atrocities. Viewed by the HSS as a form of epistemological colonization, ‘the history of India’ as written by non-Hindus transpires into forms of cultural impositions whose material impacts are rather disastrous for Hindu historiography. By forwarding such an argument, the HSS, affirms that within their discursive domain history is a tool, an instrument invested with abundant rhetorical power that can and is often manipulated to achieve religious and political ends.

Furthermore, the HSS ideologues insist that history is more than an account of past events, it is a theory. Theory, as defined by the OED is “a plausible or scientifically accepted general principle offered to explain phenomena” and “a belief policy or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action”. In the process of critiquing the
principles of history writing in colonial and postcolonial times and providing an alternative course of mapping the history of Indian nation, the HSS ideologues issue an intermediary category of ‘historical theory’ that eventually aims to substitute any other revisionist attempts. Treating history as theory therefore, performs an interesting rhetorical twist that paves the way for the transformation of history to a scientific phenomenon and assumes that the passage from the former to the latter is largely unproblematical. It makes a massive leap from the subjective chronicling of political events (as political histories are most commonly determined within academic communities today) to an objective narration of cultural ‘truths’. How and why does the HSS make this leap becomes apparent as we analyze the revisionist historical documents produced by this religio-political organization.

The role of the ‘historical theory’ that is produced within HSS communities is chiefly threefold. Primarily it seeks to revise the doctrines of colonial and postcolonial historiographies, secondly it provides radical and (un)conventional analysis of contemporary events and finally it provides a strict regimen of behavioral expectations in future from the Hindu-Indian community across the globe. Locating the onus of these duties upon the Hindu historian, the HSS further binds his/her historical position with the invocation of his/her debt to cultural heritage. It is unequivocally stated in HSS documents that the Hindu historians “have to come forward to do their duty towards their society and culture and to pay homage to their ancient heritage”(Frawley 10). It is imperative that “Hindu historians in particular” abide by “this sacred task since the Hindu Dharmashastras have enjoined upon every Hindu to repay according to his/her capacity the rishi-rina. That is, the debt we owe to our seers and sages have to be passed on to the
next generation through the spiritual and cultural vision of Hinduism and the historical tradition of Hindu heroism”(10).

Following this proclamation, a series of history books were published by the HSS and RSS during the last decade or so, in which the present condition of Indian historiography is heavily critiqued. Contemporary historians – who are not affiliated by any means to HSS/RSS ideologies – are deemed as disloyalists as they are influenced by the Western tradition of history writing and do little to no justice to the true nature of Indian nationalism. To a great extent, these historians are blamed for the current deplorable condition of Indian statehood (the relation of which to historiography seems highly untenable) what with its encouragement of democratic and secular viewpoints. An oft quoted historian from the HSS/RSS camp, David Frawley describes the current situation is India as,

Where is the soul of India today? Where is her will? She tries to stand for the underdeveloped world, for peace, tolerance, the unity of humanity and respect for all religions. But her direction is not clear. It appears that she can't even discipline herself. Western secularism, a popular culture caught up in superficial sensation, marks one line of attack against her. Western religions, their exclusive belief systems and their vast resources spent on conversion, attack on the other side. India would like to please everyone. And each group, religious, ethnic or political wants their portion of the country. In this battle the modern Hindu does not want to fight, or even to speak out. He accepts the growing secularism and sensationalism coming to his culture from the West, as perhaps necessary for economic growth, or may even see it as progressive, modern and humanitarian.

The first premise of dissatisfaction with Indian present political and cultural situation emerges from the spread of secular values which as we see from the given example is generally determined to be an element of Western imperialist influences. What is the effect of such secular values in Indian historiography? The HSS’ answer would be, it misrepresents the ‘soul’ of the nation as a multi-religious identity. It has been the HSS
tradition to equate Indian national identity essentially as a Hindu cultural identity. Continuing this practice of conflating religious and cultural traditions, the Hindu historian therefore writes a cultural history of the nation along with its rise or fall from political power. The ensuing historiography, does not treat political, cultural and religious histories as mutually exclusive. In other words, in the HSS propaganda, the term ‘Hinduism’ constitutes of all the cultural, religious as well as political belief systems within Indian subjectivity and any alternative to this proposition is brought under rigorous scrutiny. Objectivity, as far as the Indian historian is concerned, appears to be far removed from the process of history writing, since all Indian histories- as they propose - should be written chiefly to tell the story of a Hindu nation.

It is not only the content of Indian histories that the HSS wish to revise but also the process of writing of Indian histories and thereby the role of the historian. Indian history writing, the HSS argues, has been influenced by the Western methods of historiography for a very long time. It is not only so, “many Hindus still accept, read or even honor” those interpretations of Indian historical and cultural lives which are most likely to be misinterpreted in the hands of Western scholars who have no ‘insider’s’ knowledge of the culture. The act of writing history is therefore reduced to a patriotic or nationalistic act that can only be undertaken by an Indian or even better a Hindu. As a way of justifying these sentiments, the preface to David Frawley’s book suggests “Would modern Christians accept an interpretation of the Bible or biblical history done by Hindus aimed at converting them to Hindus? Universities in India still use these Western history books that propound views which denigrate their own culture and country”(3). Picking its battle with Indian historiography especially as prevalent till the middle of the twentieth
In the same century, the HSS yet again problematizes questions of postcolonial historiography. At the same time, it raises concerns about the transnational mobility of this model of historiography particularly keeping in mind its rhetorical success among the Hindu-Indian diasporic audience. Therefore, my objective here is to examine the various connotations and purposes of ‘history’ and ‘historiography’ in the HSS discourse, its rhetorical implications and the ways in which it makes meaning to its audience.

**Reading the text**

So the most significant cultural value that gathers historical import within HSS historiographies, is the notion of *indigenous resistance*. So far, the legend of the Indian nation included diverse versions of accounts of invasion by foreign rulers or tribes who came to India, looted, plundered and sometimes even settled to govern the country. The HSS looks upon such accounts as “shameful” since it somewhat characterizes the Hindu as passive, or even “emasculated” who could not protect the nation from such invasions. Keeping with the revisionist mood of such historiography projects, a revival of history of ‘resistance’ instead ensures that Hindus are not underestimated either in prowess or patriotism, both of which are estimated in high regard by religious nationalists. The Hindu historian hence explains,

> But classical India was never passive and resigned, never gave up without resistance, never gave in without defending Truth in all possible ways. India was a land of great sages and yogis, like Buddha and Shankara, but they were not merely concerned with the Transcendent, they tried to rise up the country and unite it toward a higher goal, turning it into a land where the spiritual life was honored.
In this context of honorable ‘spiritual life’, the historian then adds a short exchange from the Bhagavad Gita (freely modified and interpreted) which juxtaposes those circumstances in life that extorts both spiritual and material actions. Comparing life to the battlefield of Kurukshetra⁹ the historian recreates a scene and assumes the role of Krishna to ask Arjun:

Arise Arjun! Yours is not a battle at one point of time only. It is for all time. It must be fought over and over again, even for eternity. Truth cannot compromise itself with falsehood. Someone has to hold the limit. If not you, who will it be? And what will you say to your children? What will you bequeath them having surrendered your soul without a struggle?

The voice of Arjuna, he assumes, would say the following under these circumstances,

"I will not give in, even one inch to the forces of destruction. If I must be sacrificed, so be it. But I will dedicate my total effort to the fight. Death in the battle is preferable to a life without dignity. The Dharma must be upheld. With adharma there can be no tolerance. We cannot rest until it is completely removed and first it must be stripped from our own hearts."

The dramatic impact of such a dialogue is interestingly interwoven into the narrative that obviously sets out to do more than document historical events. In the Hindu historian’s scheme of things therefore, gods and mythological characters played an active role in determining the fate of the nation and the action of its people. This kind of history cannot be entirely categorized as a ‘puranic’ history or a historical narrative where the rulers on earth were appointed by divine will and enjoyed tenure only as long as the will of the gods prevailed. Partha Chatterjee in his book the Nation and Its Fragments discusses the writing of Puranic histories in India by Mrityunjay Vidyalankar at around 1780 AD, commissioned by the East India Company officials in Calcutta. Written outside the influence of European models of historiography, Mrityunjay’s book is one of the first of

⁹ Where a major part of the epic Mahabharata is set.
its kind that exclusively talks about the history of the kings who ruled India. Chatterjee explains that this form of historiography shared allegiances to precolonial methods of Indian historiography and was then believed to be the most valid form of retelling the political history of India. The most interesting aspect of Mrityunjay’s history writing is that “in recalling the history of kingdoms, he does not look for a history of himself” (Chatterjee 83). So as to say “his own position in relation to his narrative is fixed – it is the position of the praja, the ordinary subject, who is most often only the sufferer and sometimes only the beneficiary of acts of government” (Chatterjee 84). Contrary to such an act of erasure of subject positions, the HSS historians (e.g. Dr. Frawley, Vama Deb Shastri, Raja Gopal Chari) somewhat self-appoints themselves as agents of the gods and rulers of classical India. In recreating a dialogue between Krishna and Arjun for instance, the historian takes up rhetorical responsibilities of drawing parallels between the two situations and also demonstrating what path of action should be followed. Consequently, the role of the historian moves beyond its conventional boundaries and becomes that of a proselytizer. Moreover, the function of his historical text is to bestow this agency over to the audience, who are then selected to be individual historical and political agents in nationalist movements. Or so to say, once the audience is convinced of the role of the historian in preaching the ‘true’ history of the nation, it then becomes the duty of each of those present in the audience to now assume the role of the same historian (although they have not literally written the text) and deliver the message that they have heard. Members of the HSS community usually attend these public history lectures either in Hindu heritage camps organized periodically or through history textbooks that are often distributed within the community. Since this form of history writing concentrates
more on the ways of reading the text, rather than documentation of events, it is most important to disseminate those reading methodologies to a large group of people. The purpose of reading history thus becomes a matter of comprehending the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way of reading it. Once the ‘right’ way is conveyed to the audience, the text keeps being reproduced through the listener or reader who then becomes the teacher/historian.

Resistance to foreign invasions, as I mentioned earlier, marks an important aspect for Hindu historiographers in determining the trajectory of Indian sovereignty. Without *resistance*, as it stands for the desire of freedom and establishing nationalist sentiments, the assignment of HSS historiography almost falls apart. It is to the interest of the Hindu historian that a recurrent pattern of opposition to invasions be established in their documents so as to historicize the birth and development of Indian nationalism as an age old phenomenon. It is a major flaw with all present Indian historiographic models, they argue, that such resistances are not specified and their true nature revealed. What happens therefore is,

India's history has become a history of foreign invaders - Aryans, Iranians, Greeks, Parthians, Scythians, Kushans, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British - rather than a history of the greatest civilization which the world has known, and later on of Hindu heroism which fought and ultimately frustrated all foreign invaders. India itself has become a sub-continent seething with a mass of heterogeneous humanity rather than an ancient and indivisible Hindu homeland. Indian people have become a conglomeration of nationalities, racial groups and religious communities which are finding it difficult to co-exist in peace, rather than a national society which is trying to reform itself and reclaim some of its unfortunate sections alienated from it by successive waves of Islamic, Christian and modern Western imperialism. And Indian culture has become a mechanical mixture of odds and ends, indigenous and imported, rather than a homogeneous whole created by a vast spiritual vision which is finding itself ill at ease with incompatible impositions (Frawley 15).
Also, it is this vision of India’s history, Frawley recommends, that lead to British colonialism and then the partition in 1947.

It was this version of India's history which gave a good conscience to the British imperialist while he pulverized Hindu society, plundered Hindu wealth and poured undisguised contempt on Hindu culture. It was this version of India's histories, which emasculated Hindu society and emboldened the residues of Islamic imperialism to stage street riots and then walk away with precious parts of the Hindu homeland, thus consolidating an aggression which had not succeeded even though mounted again and again for more than a thousand years. It is this version of India's history which is being invoked by the fifth-columns of Islam, Christianity, and Communism, each of which looks forward to a final conquest of this country with the help of foreign finances and, if need be, foreign firearms. And it is this version of India's history which is being promoted by power-hungry politicians who woo the Muslim vote-bank while they divide Hindu society into mutually hostile camps. (Frawley 18).

What happened as we see from these two instances is that history served both as the cause for invasions and its effect too. In the case of the former, it was the misrepresentation of histories of resistances that lead the British to believe that India could be colonized and further divided. At the same time it is because of India’s plight under British imperialism that today its history is primarily recognized as a history of foreign invasions. A double bind indeed, that desperately needed to be untangled by the HSS to historicize instances of specific resistance.

As a result, the history of Indian resistance to foreign invasions is categorized into two broad historical periods, namely the advent of Muslim and then British (Christian) invaders. Spanning over approximately more than a thousand years in the first case and a little over two hundred in the second, these tales of ‘heroism’ reveal “resilience of character”, “strong urge to defend the nation” and “visions of a unified nation” (Savarkar 4). No matter what the religion or culture of the invaders were, each time their tale is being told one has to distinguish between the self constituted as Hindu – who is pious, patient, tolerant of other religions, knowledgeable and peace loving – as against the other
religious followers who were barbaric, dishonest, destructive and had no tolerance for other religions. Once the relationship between such a self and the ‘enemy’ are set, the rest of the history of resistance becomes a moral battle, between the good and the evil, the righteous and the unrighteous, the apparently meek and timid Hindu taking up arms only when pushed to the limits. In the preface to his book, on the topic of Hindu histories P. Mishra writes “the present thesis is an attempt to provide a connected account of the prolonged and sustained efforts made by Indians to stem the tide of early Muslim invaders. The political and military resistance was spread over more than five and half centuries till its final collapse in northern India in the last decade of the 12th Century A.D..” Beginning with this brief passage on the characteristics of confrontations between the Hindus and Muslims he continues

For long, historians have emphasized merely the ultimate collapse of the Indians, ignoring completely the resistance offered by them. It is a fact of history that such sustained resistance as encountered by the Muslim arms in India was not faced by them in any other land conquered by them? The Indian resistance had another facet, which was the outcome of the resolute determination of the Indians to preserve their religious and cultural identity. While country after country, from the straits of Gibralter to the banks of the Indus, witnessed the rapid Islamization of their individual cultures, even Northern India managed to survive as a predominantly ‘heathen’ land even after five centuries of Muslim rule? (Mishra 20).

It gradually becomes evident that the initial invocation of gods and mythic rulers endowed with divine powers, much in the manner of ‘puranic’ history now takes a backstage whereas political rivalries and conflicts of national boundaries surfaces as more imminent topics for Hindu revisionist historiography. History here is condensed to a mere struggle for political power.

While tracing the genealogy of Indian nationalist history, Partha Chatterjee delineates its characteristics as one that starts with the glorification of a precolonial
period “in wealth power learning and religion. This nation was sometimes called Bengali, sometimes Hindu, sometimes Arya, sometimes Indian, but the form of the history remained the same. After this came the age of decline. The cause of the decline was Muslim rule, that is to say, the subjection of the nation” (94). Much in the same manner, Hindu historiography too advocates a classical age that had a flourishing economy, exceptional cultural education and effective political unity. For instance, in his foundational book “What is Hindutva” V.D. Savarkar reconstructs the ‘true’ history of Hindus in India within a chronological framework that dates back to the coming of the Aryans into the subcontinent around 1500 to 1000 BC. The history of the Hindus as Savarkar states in his book concerns mostly questions of identity that is interlinked with race, nationality and religion. It is amply evident from the book that Savarkar’s tracing the development of Hindu identity also formulates an exclusionist nationalism which postcolonial historians like Romila Thapar defines as identity through political mobilization based on a particular religion. In the process, followers of other religions are allocated as subordinate to the Hindus and therefore should either state allegiance to Hindus as superior to them or be excluded from the national territories of Hindus that is India. As Savarkar writes,

The Aryans made it their home and lighted the first sacrificial fire on the banks of the Sindhu, the Indus, yet certain it is that long before the ancient Egyptians, and Babylonians has built their magnificent civilization, the holy waters of the Indus were daily witnessing the lucid and curling columns of the scented sacrificial smokes and the valleys resounding with chants of Vedic hymns – the spiritual fervor that animated their souls. The adventurous valor that propelled their intrepid enterprises, the sublime heights to which their thoughts rose – all these had marked them out as a people destined to lay the foundation of a great and enduring civilization. By the time they had definitely cut themselves aloof from their cognate and neighboring people especially the Persians, the Aryans, had spread out to the farthest of the seven rivers, Sapta Sindhus, and not only had they developed a sense of nationality but had already succeeded in
giving it a local habitation and name!... Thus in the very dawn of history we find ourselves belonging to the nation of the Sindhus or Hindus and this was well known to our learned men even in the Puranic period (6).

Certain elements of Savarkar’s construction of an unique Hindu history become obvious when he refers to ideas like “long before” and “dawn of history” while mapping the unfolding of historical time on a linear scale where Hindus came before anybody else. Other than that, the Hindus in Savarkar’s description were superior in knowledge and prowess and also right from the time of their advent into the Hindu-land established their national sovereignty.

A significant shift in the HSS paradigm of historiography is noticeable since the publication of Savarkar’s book in 1927. Hindu historiographic models now tend to differ from its earlier notions of Aryan invasion into the subcontinent and thereby the establishment of a superior Hindu racial identity. Fiercely contesting earlier interpretations of Aryan invasion, it is now fashionable among HSS communities to believe that the Hindus were not part of an invading group of people who forcefully occupied the northern territories of India, discriminating against the aboriginal ‘Dravidians’ who by these terms become the real descendents of the country. To prove to themselves and others that although the resistances of Hindus towards other foreign enemies are worthy to be glorified they themselves never participated in such carnage as wrought by the invaders, it is crucial for Hindu historians to readjust their earlier theory of Aryan invasion. This newly found order of classical events also establishes, as I read it, continuity in the mapping of Hindu history. David Frawley insists on this new interpretation of Aryan theory as he writes,
Putting together Vedic literature, the largest of the ancient world, with the Harappan civilization, the largest of the ancient world, a picture emerges of ancient India as the largest civilization of the ancient world with the largest and best preserved literature, a far more logical view, and one that shows India as a consistent center from which civilization has spread over the last five thousand years.

He then proceeds to say that “ancient India now appears not as a broken civilization deriving its impetus from outside invaders but as the most continuous and consistent indigenous development of civilization in the ancient world, whose literary record, the ancient Vedas, remains with us today” (Frawley 15, emphasis added). According to Romila Thapar, at the core of the claim to the aforementioned continuity is to establish that an Indian identity must indeed be a Hindu identity. In the HSS argument that there has been a Hindu linear identity from the classical ages to the present time we see an attempt towards historical legitimization of an exclusivist politics where “all other groups that are said to have entered India at various times whether as invaders, or traders and intruders, and interacted with Indian civilization” are regarded as aliens (Mukta 597).

That there is an ongoing debate among Indian historians regarding the basis of Aryan infiltration into the subcontinent is evident from Romila Thapar’s discussion of it in some of her recent articles. In her opinion, the invention of the concept of the Aryan race dates back to mid-nineteenth century which also marked the Vedic age as foundational in Indian historiography. Scholars like Max Muller accepted and further perpetuated this historical interpretation that applied Aryan invasion to the beginnings of Indian history. Due to the foundational status enjoyed by this version of Indian historiography, the evolution of Indian civilization and culture came to be most commonly viewed in terms of both Aryan and Vedic contributions dating back to late
second millennium BC. However, in the twentieth century the excavations of archeological sites of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro resulted in new interpretations of the Indus valley civilization as clearly a pre-Vedic civilization. This proved to be especially tragic for the Hindutva group since the new archeological findings negated the unbroken linear historical descent of Hindus in India that they had grown to be so fond of. “The logic of Hindutva” says Thapar “therefore required that Vedic civilization must be taken back in time and identified with the Indus civilization. And that is the attempt that is now being made – to describe the Indus civilization as essentially identical with the Vedic culture, in order that their claim to a linear unbroken ancestry which goes back to Vedic sources remains intact” (597). The nineteenth century Orientalists’ interpretation of Indian history has so far proved to be beneficial for the Hindutva group since they described Indian civilization as a purely Hindu civilization where the advent of the Muslims only meant to be destructive for the existing Hindus. To keep such views afloat, it became crucial to explore the reasons for the destruction of the Harappan civilization. Needless to say, historical explanations for the destruction of Harappan cities have taken many turns over the years. Among them, Mortimer Wheeler’s archeological evidence showed destruction of cities and therefore helped to crystallize the notion of an Aryan invasion. Later, however new reasons for such destructions came into surface mainly emphasizing environmental conditions. Causes such as “the flooding of the river Indus, the rise and fall of sea level, major climatic change or even massive deforestation that was carried out for the purpose of making bricks that changed the leading to an ecological change that affected agriculture” are now being argued as more affordable reasons for the destruction of the Harappan cities (Thapar 603). Nevertheless, the
question regarding how the Aryans came to India still remains problematic as there is little evidence of a massive invasion. It is also difficult to substantiate ideas of a massive migration from the west. At the same time, one cannot quite conform to the HSS viewpoint that Aryans were indigenous to India since archeological findings do at least show that the Indus people had close contacts with their borderlands and there is sufficient linguistic affinity between Indo-Aryan and Old Iranian.

Sriram Sathe – a member and noted historian of the HSS group – acknowledges that the Orientalists’ interpretation of Aryan invasion of India was much flawed. It was flawed because Indologists like Max Muller and Sir William Jones wanted to institutionalize a colonial historiography model over that of indigenous Indian models. The nature of this colonial historiography had racist implications from the very beginning, Sathe argues. This is particularly manifested in the ways in which the British imperialists attempted to thrust the concept of their superior racial status over those of their colonial subjects. ‘History’ played a crucial role in this battle for supremacy, as Sathe suggests, due to the fact that Europeans did not have a history as ancient as that of India. In his words,

European nations were created during the past two millennia. Prior to achieving nationhood, they were fighting wild tribes. After their successes in conquering different countries all over the world since the sixteenth century AD, a crave developed in them to prove their ancient and civilized ancestry. In the 19th century AD, they picked the word Arya from the ancient Hindu literature where alone it means respectable, civilized, superior, elder, etc. Europeans wanted themselves to be honored by others by this name of ancient fame and they invented the theory of the Aryan race. The Europeans then declared themselves belonging to that Aryan race (8).

Since the main reason behind the Orientalists’ interest in professing a history of the Aryan civilization can now be reduced to a desire for ancient lineage, Sathe then takes the
next step to explain how the British historian’s imperialist tendencies were voiced in a
broadly construed version of Aryan invasion.

As the word Arya was taken from ancient Hindu literature, the Hindus were also
required to be included in that Aryan race of their conjecture. Hindus were the
residents of India. Hence a theory was coined about the original home of the
Aryans in Eurasia between Europe and the other to have invaded India. One
branch of the Aryans was stated to have gone to Europe and the other to have
invaded India. As the Vedas belong not to the Europeans but to Hindus only, Max
Mueller inferred that those must have been compiled by the Hindus, the so-called
Indo-Aryans, after they reached India. He had already dated Vedas in 1200 BC.
Now he dated the Aryan Invasion in 1500 BC, three hundred years earlier to that
of the Vedas (8).

And henceforth the HSS historians gleefully branded the Aryan invasion theory as a
biased one. They also delineate the causes for this bias attitude in the ‘conqueror’s ego’
that the British had developed due to their immense success in colonizing countries of
Asia and Africa which “prompted them to search for the original home of the Aryans
somewhere near to their countries” (Sathe 7). At the same time ‘the Hindus were only a
defeated nation’ when the British first came to India, invaded and ruled by Muslim kings,
which aided the construction of the Aryan invasion theory that took away all the classical
glory of the Hindu establishment. To propagate their alliance with Aryan ancestors, Sathe
says, the British attached “childish corollaries” to the Aryan history. One of these
‘corollaries’ tended to draw similarities between the ‘white skin’ and ‘particular facial
features’ of people of Northern European origin with those of the Aryans. From “these
qualities attached to the Aryans” it seems highly probable that the Aryan race theory “is
only a conjecture of persons suffering from superiority complex. Ancient Indian
chronology need not depend on it or its invasion of India” (Sathe 8). Once they have
successfully refuted the notion of the coming of the Aryans to India, historians in the
likes of Sathe move on to the next most important and useful category in the construction of an indigenous model of historiography.

After *continuity* of political victories came to emphasize an unbroken lineage of Hindu history of India, it became imperative for HSS historians to ‘restore’ a chronology for the sequence of these events. The fundamental difference between the contested models of European and Indian historiography is summarized in HSS terms to an absence of dates, or in other words knowledge of definitive time for occurrence of events. Without this *time* component explicitly laid out, the European historiographers often mistake Indian history as fragments of imagination failing to note how time is interwoven into the narrative. *Time* resurfaces frequently in HSS discourse as way of granting legitimacy to its operations. Anything that could withstand the test of ‘time’ – which was often constructed for validity and evidence – was immediately professed as eternal or transcendental. Therefore, to assert the status of a Hindu religious or cultural practice, almost unfailingly the duration of its existence is noted which helped to establish a hierarchy based on supposed permanence. Defined in cosmological cycles, *time* is undoubtedly a significant element in ancient Indian philosophy. As a part of this cyclical nature of life and its events, one is caught in the recurrence of birth and history. In other words, just the way human life is caught in the cycle of birth and rebirths, history is also a part of this process and therefore repeats itself. For instance, Savarkar writes in his book that the temporal existence of meaning, that is how long the meaning has been in vogue, affects the relationship between the word and its implication. A word can have closely related but multiple meanings. But, just as the longevity of any one meaning is established it obliterates any other and purges itself of all ambiguities, of alternate
possibilities. So, if one could evince the existence of a meaning over a long period of
time one could clearly denote that word as having only one irrefutable meaning.
Consequently, the etymologies of concepts develop as persuasive instruments much as
the politics of naming when Savarkar proceeds to show the meaning of Hindu or
Hindutva as they have progressed over time and as they stand now. The word Hindu for
Savarkar, “thus would be the name that this land [India] and the people that inhabited it
bore from time so immemorial that even the Vedic name Sindhu\textsuperscript{10} is a later and
secondary form of it”\textsuperscript{11}(10). Noting the time that has elapsed between the origin of the
concept and its present status is thus a way of validating continuous existence and
asserting rights. Rather than following a linear sequencing of time, the recurrence of
events within this cosmic cycle exemplifies as HSS ideologues say that one should
always prepare oneself against reappearance of unpleasant histories. As part of the
exercise of learning from experience therefore, it is essential to be awakened to the truth
of past times as well as future. Time serves as an agent of memory, it helps to construct
ideas and usher them to existence while also erasing them from memory. This dual
interplay of time is what the HSS seeks to aware its audience about, that to forget is not
tantamount to escaping reality. Through the construction of such time bound impact HSS
thus ascertains the history of Indian colonization as re-emergent, the danger being
especially imminent within a foreign cultural context.

According to Sathe the concept of recording time and date for historical accounts
among Indian historians were highly dissimilar than those of the British. The British
\textsuperscript{10}The river Sindhu on the west bank of India where arguably the Aryans first came and settled and also
where the Indus valley civilization thrived.
\textsuperscript{11}He further goes on to state that “if the epithet Sindhu dates its antiquity in the glimmering twilight of
history then the word Hindu dates its antiquity from a period so remoter than the first that even mythology
fails to penetrate – to trace it to its source”(10).
harbored such an unhealthy obsession on this that William Jones a famous Indologist believed that “Creation took place at 9:00 AM on 23rd October 4004 BC” (Sathe 3). This was soon translated in the British historians reading of Indian history where such precision of date and time seems largely absent. Considering this a pivotal point in understanding the difference between these two models Sathe forwards a handful of reasons for such discrepancy. First of all, he explains, it is not a historical error that the dates of events are not stated in Indian historiography. It is sufficiently easy to prove this since Indian history books chronicle ample details about incidents regarding where, why and how they took place. Drawing references from two instances of Buddha’s life and Mahabharata war Sathe states

The first convention of the Buddhists took place in the year of his nirvana. In that convention, his teachings were compiled and recorded but not his date. It is not that they did not know the date but they did not feel the necessity of putting it down in writing. The second Buddhists convention took place in the reign of Asoka the Great. Then also the date was not put in writing. It is said to be just 200 years after the nirvana (11).

If a king as Ashok, who played a major role in transcribing and spreading Buddhist literature and religion to places outside the subcontinent in and around 232 BC and have been mightily praised for that in Indian history, could have refrained from noting the dates of these crucial events then one cannot say with certitude that Indian historians were deliberately negligent in referring to dates. Following up on this argument Sathe notes,

Similar is the case of Vyasa who wrote the epic Mahabharata. He was present when the war took place. He had full knowledge of the date. What can then be the reason for not stating the date? The epic contains about one lakh Stanzas. He has given so many minute details regarding the astronomical positions of the different events in the War. It cannot be that he did not note down the date of the War because of inertia or carelessness. It will be a grave charge (11).
So what do we make of this apparent ‘lack’ in Indian historiographic methodology that sharply contrasts against its European counterpart? A re-reading of the reception of Indian historical texts is offered by the HSS historians as a good starting point to reconcile these differences as merely indigenous and foreign models of historiography and not necessarily superior or inferior ones. Including the two major epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as part of a large repertoire of historical texts Sathe and others acclaim that the success of history books rest in their ability to be translated as cultural texts. As a matter of fact,

> Indian historical literature was composed with a definite object. Ancient Hindu seers wanted the history books to impress the minds of individuals in such a way that they would develop a balanced approach towards life and achieve the four Purusharthas\(^{12}\) Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha during their life time. Seers had a conviction that events and anecdotes of history and the morals derived from them were more effective in molding the minds of the individuals than were the continuous dates of events and the names of the authors. That is why one finds a number of side stories introduced in the main story of the Mahabharata. It is not a defect but a useful characteristic of the epic. That is the Indian way of history writing. It was done with a definite purpose (Sathe 12).

For this ‘purpose’ alone, contemporary Hindu historians find their hands full today with a large body of “historical literature” that are distinguishable for not being part of the colonial historiographic project. Historical texts, Sathe believes, were not only popular in ancient India but were also revered. Today, this popularity still remains “as this literature is available to thousands of Indians in their regional languages and dialects” (Sathe 12). It is also crucial to understand that for a sizable number of Indians these texts are available only in oral forms. Since the chief function of history texts were education of the masses the ‘sutras’ or people who recited these texts were carefully selected for their skills in

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oratory. They had to be adept in the various dialects of their language of recitation to reach a good number of audiences. Moreover,

These orators would have to narrate the history time and time again according to the convenience of the villager and also the forest dwellers and this continued for thousands of years. Hence generations after generations of orators were trained to narrate history skillfully and effectively in various languages of this vast country. These sutras considered it their sacred duty and life-time mission to be wandering minstrels all their life, whatever the odds they were required to face. They had conviction that whatever is written in these books is the history of this nation. It is most useful to the society and hence, they deemed it their duty to devote their lives to deliver it to the masses (Sathe 10).

We eventually see that like most activities of the HSS, even historiographical pursuits resonate patriotic fervor. Since recitation of texts that stand for both historical and cultural edification is not quite uncommon in India, HSS historians have been successful in bringing a large volume of those under the rubric of ‘history’. The underlying assumption being that the transcendental qualities of these texts – affirmed by the fact that they were orally transmitted for generations - make them historical without conforming to any “regular history” model as that of recording dates of specific historical occurrences.

Compilation of history texts however, Sathe explains, was also a major collaborative project that took place periodically throughout the history of India. In the classical times especially since most of these texts were orally transmitted, the collaborative projects indicated efforts made by certain progressive rulers in codifying the historical import of the oral texts. So a conscious movement towards documented historiography resurfaced from time to time which makes Hindu historiography of India an interesting amalgam of oral as well as written historical knowledge. This line of argument seems to avow HSS claims that to understand the Indian historiographic models
one need to have an insider’s knowledge which may not be found in written
documentation and available only through oral interpretations. The last of these
compilations of orally transmitted historical texts took place as Sathe notes during the
beginning of the Kaliyug\textsuperscript{13} and came to be known as the Naimisharanya Conference that
continued for twelve years. In this conference “smriti (written) and shruti (oral) texts,
history books and such other literature useful for the society was prepared”(Sathe 13).
The document thus produced was not only a critical account of the regimes of various
kings of the nation but also an amended version of the original texts. The original texts by
then were heavily interpolated containing numerous “errors due to ignorant scribes who
misread and misinterpreted” and therefore had to be revised “to evolve an authoritative
and valid account of the dynasties and kings” (Sathe 11). After all these efforts put in
through twelve years of intense study of the documents the historians came to understand,
as did Sathe and his followers, that the history of the nation goes so far back in the past
that there cannot be a date ascribed to its beginning. This should not be mistaken as an
abortive gesture since the process of cleansing and reinterpreting classical texts and
historical documents is kept alive even today by Hindu historians. Rather, these kinds of
unbeknownst ‘conferences’ are foundational in institutionalizing HSS exclusivist
doctrines, the chief of which leads to the exposition of the ‘longevity’ of Indian nation.
So finally Sathe stridently proclaims that,

\textit{It is possible in case of short lived nations to prepare a continuous chronology of
their history but not so in case of India whose source material is being destroyed
by nature because of its longevity. Indians have evolved their special type of
historiography suitable not only to describe their past but also to help the nation to
continue its life for long in future. It was a carefully studied decision. It saved the
Indian nation for the last thousands of years from the man-made attacks as well as
natural calamities. It also saved their nation from the bad effects of ample}

\textsuperscript{13} The present era in Hindu cycle of ages or periods of civilization.
prosperity which some countries are found experiencing at present. The availability of continuous chronology of short lived nations may be useful to other nations for information, but not much for guidance to plan their future. Indian historiography is definitely useful for this. They can understand the secrets of longevity of the Hindus. The Indian notion of historiography is much superior to the European one (14).

In the final chapters of his book on Indian historiography, Sriram Sathe discusses the implications of this historical tradition in contemporary times. He also elucidates the need for adapting these ancient strategies of historical documentation to modern means and methods. His reasons center on an understanding of the current global political and cultural situation and the transformation it has brought about in the lives of the Indians among others. Keeping in mind these changes he says “the utility of Indian history is now not limited to the Indians only. The world wants to know it and learn from it. A long interval has passed since books on Indian history were compiled according to the Bharateeya (Indian) historiography. Fresh effort is most urgent. The changed circumstances should also be noted. In this new recension, in addition to the original qualities of Indian historiography some complementary details like the chronology for some thousands of years may be added to facilitate the foreigners to understand it” (14).

Another noted HSS historian David Frawley shows similar concerns in his book when he claims that “at times and in certain situations” as that of present day India “the frontiers of a nation are not merely physical they are also ideological”. That the scope of this ideological category of the nation or nationalist sentiments is elastic and can be maneuvered is being recognized by the HSS and therefore they have incorporated influential alterations to present their religio-political documents chiefly to diasporic Indians. In order to reach to this new audience the HSS ensures that all its publications are simultaneously published in English and other Indian languages. Together with this
new strategy all books including the history books that I read here end on this explicit note of making the ‘Hindu’ materials available to Hindus in India and abroad. So, as Sathe recounts ways of incorporating these changes in the organization’s structures while at the same time making references to the western world not merely as colonizers but more as a neighbor (or even better, brother) who has gone astray. With an element of sympathy and hopelessness in his tone he concurs once again that the Western civilization is caught up in its own material interest so much so that it forgets the purpose of its own history. Drawing out the distinctiveness and genealogy of the word ‘history’ and its translation in Sanskrit ‘itihas’ Sathe points out that whereas the Western version of history has always delimited itself to political events, Sanskrit itihas has sought to include “narration of past events concerning all the facets of human life – material, moral and spiritual”(14). On the basis of this comprehensive approach “ithas has tried to ingrain moral values in every individual in the Hindu society” but unfortunately “history has approached it from a material and political standpoint” (15). Personifying ‘history’ and ‘itihas’ as two separate entities with two different trajectories emerges as an interesting rhetorical ploy that invokes the celebrated Bollywood image of two brothers where one is worldly wise and thus more successful while the other has fallen into bad company due to unforeseen circumstances. The successful brother reprimands the other for his misjudgments but is willing to help him return to ‘normal’ circumstances if only he pledges to follow his prosperous brother’s advice. Yet, there is a long way to go since “though Europeans and others in recent years are found increasing the scope of the meaning of the word history, and it is encompassing many other subjects than political history, it has remained to the material world only” (15). One can safely conclude from

14 The Indian movie industry located in Bombay and informally known as Bollywood.
this sudden turn of events that it serves as more profitable for the HSS to see Anglo-
American culture more in the shades of a truant schoolboy than that of a torturous
colonizer. What with the flourishing of HSS franchises in the major European and
American countries, one sure way of keeping the audience – more so second generation
immigrants – interested is to mellow down the harsh epithets used so far in describing
Anglo-American cultures. Now, going back to my earlier metaphor of popular Hindi
movies we see Sriram Sathe calling out for future collaborative projects of compiling
Hindu historical texts along with his so called white quasi-brothers. And surely he does
not fail this time to show the strengths of such an endeavor, all the more so since he
thinks highly of the organizational skills and dedication of European and American
‘people’ with a slight hint that this is what got them to rule the Empire! So to have them
on the HSS side would ultimately prove beneficial (I detect future imperialist projects
hidden here) and of course they would be made aware of the nature of Indian national
heritage which this project would try to fulfill. As if to balance the equation, the historian
tries to strike a compromise between these two disparate groups namely Indian and
Western by stating that to be appreciated by foreign scholars, Indian historians should
agree upon introducing “a continuous chronology at least for the last five thousand
years”(15). The problem with Indian historians Sathe continues is that they have been
rather negligent of this task more so since the country’s independence in 1947. Prior to
that, he acknowledges that the Indians were busy resisting the foreign invaders although
that should not have divulged their attention from compilation of Hindu history texts.
Collecting data on various historical events seems to be the best way to launch this
project with clear intentions of serving “the nation” and being convinced “that this work
will be useful for humanity”. Sriram Sathe thus concludes his final chapter reinstating that driven by their sense of duty the compilers should first and foremost be unbiased and this is the most essential quality that he would be looking for while recruiting participants of the project who incidentally would also become members of the Hindu Volunteer Corps or HSS:

The life in the organization will collect the necessary individuals of varying capacities required for its growth. In course of time, when it is opportune, it will be able to project individuals like our seers of the past having intellectual acumen, proper judgment, literary qualities and sense of working as a part of the organization. It is they who will write properly the history books according to the Hindu historiography suitable to the present day world (17).

**At the time of ‘its’ birth**

So far I have been examining the historical and historiographic assumptions made by contemporary HSS historians that re-orients the discourse of history to meet the political needs of a religious organization. Writing about the history of the nation has been a popular pursuit among the educated group members of the HSS and they have given voice to this indulgence since the organization’s inception. In this section I argue that in spite of Sriram Sathe, David Frawley and Vamdeb Shastri’s\(^{15}\) vehement protest against European models of historiography and its impositions upon Indian history writing process, they continue to be informed by the European trends today as much as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century. In order to reveal the scope of this influence, I would like to explore the occasion of RSS/HSS’ birth during colonial times. Constructing a unified Hindu identity dates back to the 19\(^{th}\) century when Western Orientalists sought to represent Hinduism in the likes of the Judaeo- Christian traditions

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\(^{15}\) All noted HSS revisionist historiographers.
emphasizing on a single religious term like ‘Hinduism’ which can aptly summarize the religion of the Hindu people. This epistemological category ‘Hindism’ which came to represent a homogenized identity bears no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious beliefs and practices. On the contrary it mirrors a feeble attempt at coalescence, one that often ends up postulating intolerance towards followers of other religions.

According to Richard King there are two major ways in which Western colonization has contributed to the modern edifice of Hinduism namely by textualizing Hindu religious principles and redefining Hindu religion in terms of the paradigms established by Judaeo-Christian traditions. Consequently, “the new Hinduism which is now sought to be projected as a religion of the community is in many ways a departure from the earlier religious sects. It seeks historicity for the incarnation of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported large scale missionary work and conversion” (Thapar 85).

None of the abovementioned conditions of an apparently cohesive ‘Hinduism’ bears immediacy with the Hindu way of life practiced through centuries. In my discussion here, I would like to point out the nature of this dissonance between the codification of religious principles in recent times by the HSS and its point of departure with historical accounts of the loosely structured Hindu religious anatomy.

Talking about the historical relevance of contemporary religio-political versions of Hinduism, Romila Thapar points out that the evolution of Hinduism roughly since the first millennium AD (when different sects came to be recognized and referred to in the literature of the period) is not a linear progression from a founder through an
organizational structure that later gives rise to various subdivisions. The way Thapar
looks upon it is rather as a “mosaic” of “distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas and the
adjusting, juxtaposing or distancing of these to existing ones, the placement drawing not
only on belief and ideas but also on the socio-economic reality” (Thapar 69). Much as it is
a surprise, these differences in the intellectual conception of religion and its practices
peacefully co-existed as it was determined by the need of the particular sect or caste. In
an almost idyllic state of affairs diversity in beliefs were tolerated, even renouncers were
respected as private domains of beliefs were common and accepted in view of the fact
that the prevalence of multiplicity of cults and sects also reflected multiplicity of beliefs.
However, as Thapar explains this concurrent existence of an array of religious
articulations should not be mistaken as an attempt to absorb all sects into a unified
identity, rather it indicates the intricate relationship between religious beliefs and
practices and social and political needs in early Indian society. Most often, small sects or
religious groups acclaimed political legitimacy, more so since the fate of these sects
hinged upon the status of their patrons. A particular royal family could provide patronage
to multiple sects and was conditioned by both religious catholicity as well as the
exigencies of political and social requirements. Since the castes were one of the primary
determinants of religious beliefs and practices, they were often shaped according to the
requirements of the caste. At the same time the diverse practices were contingent upon
varied geographical locations and historicity of deities or incarnations were limited
within those geographical boundaries only. In all, the early Indian society deemed Hindu
religion as an assortment of varied positions where differences of opinions were common
and reliant on social, economic and political stipulations.
Being rooted in such social conditions, Hinduism over the centuries continued to recognize and accept the conglomeration of beliefs and ideas belonging to various castes and sects. Therefore, as most historians agree, the construction of a single Hindu identity has been a more recent phenomenon – from roughly around early twentieth century – to a great extent inspired by nineteenth century Western discourses of Orientalism and also as a part of anti-colonial struggle. How the quest for a single Hindu identity formulated anti-colonial responses will be discussed later in this chapter, for now I would like to explore the main trends of Orientalist discourse regarding Hinduism and to what extent they shaped the ideological underpinnings of political Hinduism in more recent times.

As Richard King reveals in his article *The Modern Myth of Hinduism* that currently there are possibly two most powerful images of Eastern religiosity characterized within Western imagination, namely that of the ‘mystical East’ and the ‘militant fanatic’. For King, the notion of the ‘mystic’ has been a continuous process even prior to colonial interventions “precisely because for some it represents what is most disturbing and outdated about Eastern culture, while for others it represents the magic, the mystery and the sense of the spiritual that they perceive to be lacking in modern Western culture”(97). Juxtaposing the images of the coarse and unsophisticated Orient along with its spiritual richness, the European imagination constructed the myth of Hinduism that is at once tolerant and militant. As a consequence, both these trends of the saga of ‘Hinduism’ becomes evident in the writings of Hindu philosophers and social reformers like S. Radhakrishnan and Swami Vivekananda and also by revolutionary nationalists like V.D Savarkar and his Hindu Right organization RSS/HSS. For instance, the proliferation of translations of Hindu religious texts during the first half of the
twentieth century - in search for a seminal text that adequately encapsulates religious
tenets – like the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads and the Vedas conform a great deal to
the image of the peace-loving spiritually motivated Hindu religiosity. S. Radhakrishnan
writes in his preface to The Bhagavad Gita that the contents of the book provides a
humanitarian path to knowledge as opposed to the pragmatic scientific approaches

War and post-war periods tend to bring into prominence the value of sciences,
especially their practical applications. These are important for the conduct of wars
and the comfort of the citizens in peace. But if we have to give largeness and
wisdom to men’s outlook in life, we should lay stress on humanities also. The
relation of sciences to humanities may be stated roughly to be one of means to
ends. In our enthusiasm for the means we should not overlook the ends. The
concepts of right and wrong do not belong to the sphere of science; yet it is on the
study of ideas centering around these concepts that human action and happiness
ultimately depend. A balanced culture should bring the two great halves to
harmony. The Bhagavad Gita is a valuable aid for the understanding of the
supreme ends of life.

What I mean to say here is not that the spirit of endurance and forbearance was only an
Orientalist construct, rather that there was a general tendency starting from the 19th
century to uphold the core of Hinduism frequently in this light, and that much of the
philosophical texts produced in and around this time will attest to such claim. Sharply
contrasting the prominence of ‘spirituality’ and non-violence in Indian religio-
philosophical principles against the colonizing inclinations of the British Empire,
philosophers and social reformers like Vivekananda attempts to establish a unifying
nationalist identity that somewhat was based on political Hinduism. As a rejoinder to his
colonizers, Vivekananda called upon, “muscles of iron and nerves of steel…that can only
be created, established and strengthened by understanding the ideal of the Advaita
Vedanta [non-dualism], the ideal of the oneness of all. Let me tell you strength is all we
want and the first step in getting strength is to uphold the Upanishads and believe I am
the Soul, I am the Omnipotent, I am the Omniscient”(Vol III, pg 241). Vivekananda’s mission of gaining political consciousness of the masses was also infiltrated with philosophical knowledge that he recognized to be crucial for anti-colonial nationalism. Therefore, he says “It is a man-making religion that we want. It is man-making theories that we want. It is man-making education all round that we want”(Vol III, pg 244).

Partha Chatterjee distinguishes between the material and the spiritual as the two main sovereign domains of colonial resistance in the history of Indian nationalist culture. According to him

the material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an ‘inner’ domain bearing the essential marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture”(Chatterjee 6).

The relevance of Chatterjee’s taxonomies to my argument is that this ‘inner’ domain of sovereign spiritual sanctity where indigenous forms of nationalism first took place also happens to be the birthplace of the HSS/RSS. The founding fathers of the RSS and later HSS sought to create a sanctimonious space conducive to the evolving narrative of religious nationalism, which could possibly be termed as one of the “numerous fragmented resistances” to the “normalizing project” of nationalist modernity. Identifying the incompleteness of material or ‘outer’ domain, where European domination most significantly transpired, the project of effectual maintenance of the

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16 The doctrine of Advaita Vedanta or non-dualism that Vivekanda refers to here constitutes part of the progressive teaching technique applied in Indian philosophical religious tradition, at the early stages of a student’s (in this case the country’s) spiritual development. The purpose of this technique was to bring about a desired spiritual end, the process of self-realization. This self-realization also brings along with itself the knowledge of god and cognizance of the supreme spirit.
‘inner’ domain thus became central to most forms of anti-colonial resistances, most importantly for religious nationalists. The RSS and HSS took this opportunity to re-read the history of the nation as a Hindu religious enterprise, authenticating the necessity of modifications in the diverse practices of Hinduism, so that rather than a socio-cultural analysis we look upon the history of India as a “divine play”. Hinduism therefore ceased from being a collection of religious interpretations as noted by Romila Thapar and discussed earlier in this section, to an almost monolithic entity that was and continues to be mobilized for nationalist interests. Part of the reason for this emergence during the colonial era as we have seen is the obligation of constructing the ‘inner’ domain, and interestingly part of it is the making of Orientalism by its emphasis on comprehensive understanding through textualization, erecting mythical figureheads and excavating universalist principles of Hinduism. Caught between these two opposing forces of “political Hindutva” and “religious nationalism”, Hinduism materializes as yet another category of complicated national identity that manifests itself in both national and trans-national religious politics. Condensing the heterogeneity of Hindu religious beliefs and practices into epic texts and mythic incarnations only – as done by the RSS and HSS – blossomed as the Hindu right ideology and gained prominence during recent years in India as well as among its diasporic communities. This attempt at homogenization of Hinduism by the Hindu Right has much in common with Orientalism’s reductionist historiographic methodology which continues to be intelligible to HSS’ diasporic audience.
And then came modernity…

Written against the backdrop of both Orientalist influence on Indian historiography and political upheavals during Indian struggle for Independence in early 20th century, Savarkar’s book *Who is a Hindu?* elucidates a tradition/modernity conflict that is universalized and re-enacted in many instances of global religious politics. This conflict, as played out in Indian domestic and diasporic politics, brings to the forefront historical and political issues regarding Indian postcolonial realities at once unveiling the salience of religion in Indian public life. Such a trend then becomes imperative in the production of historical documents by the RSS/HSS. What especially draws my attention is that these religio-historical accounts are reshaped or even modified by the Hindu Right – operating within domestic and international politics - to accommodate modern political concepts of democracy, citizenship and nationalism. In other words, rather than including religious concepts and values within modern political ideas to promote religious politics, the HSS/RSS historiography modernize our understanding of religious history through inclusion of notions of political modernity.

Religion has always been a major influence in Indian political life. It has been manipulated both directly and indirectly to achieve political ends by various groups within the subcontinent. Whether in the hands of peasants, tribals or even the Hindu Right, the mixing of religion with politics is frequently visible while charting a history of Indian national politics. Dipesh Chakraborty summarizes the problems encountered by this commingling of politics and religion in his essay *Subaltern Histories and Post-Enlightenment Rationalism* that

17 The text that was foundational for the RSS movement during 1920-30’s.
There has been since colonial times an intellectual tradition in India that has often equated idolatry with the practices of the superstitious. Intellectuals of the Left belong, on the whole, to that tradition. Basing political action on sentiments having to do with the birthplace of the mythical god-king Ram and inciting anti-Muslim and anti-Christian feelings in the name of Hinduness – as the Hindu Right has done - have been for them examples of the irrational in political life. … Yet, however unhappy the category may be, religion is a major and enduring fact of Indian political life. Political sentiments in the subcontinent are replete with elements that could be regarded as religious, at least in origin. But Indian historians – the best of whom today are of a Marxist or Left –liberal persuasion – have never been able to develop any framework capable of comprehending the phenomenon (22).

Chakraborty’s argument is especially relevant in the case of subaltern historiography, historical documentation of resistances to elite political forces by peasants or tribals in India, which is copious with instances of how in practice these communities often involved the agency of gods and spirits in their nationalist movements. The schism between Marxist or Left – liberal scholars and subaltern historiographers as Chakraborty refers arises out of an inability to appreciate the difference between a secular democratic political system that theoretically governs the country, and those non-elite power struggles that denote direct political action. Inclusion of gods and sprits within a secular democratic political arena, seem to most historiographers trained in post-enlightenment rationalism as an atrophy of the system of governance for the country. Dipesh Chakraborty asserts that countering such notions, subaltern historiographers rank the peasant revolts and rebellions that include gods and spirits as agents of revolutionary zeal as an alternative form of nationalism that only further exposes the tradition/modernity or reason/ emotion conflict in postcolonial situations. Consequently therefore, the RSS/HSS political struggle whether in India or in the US is non-elite only in relation to this secular democratic model.
The relevance of subaltern historiographic models for my project is bounded by our understanding of the characteristics of this tradition/modernity conflict and its *articulation* in the religious-political-historical texts produced by the HSS/RSS. At the same time subaltern politics also provides an instance of indigenous nationalism that has at least partly been directed against its own nationalist elite as well as British imperialist policies. This duality embedded in the resistances of the peasants and tribals afford a fine comparison, although unequal yet relevant in some ways, for understanding the constitution of diasporic religious nationalism. That is to say, I examine here how religious resurgent movements like that of the RSS/HSS in India negotiate the intermediate spaces between traditional forms of nationalism and modern political governance. Most importantly, I look at the ways in which these conflicting ideologies get reproduced in texts which are then used for mass education and communication exemplifying immense rhetorical possibilities. This process of negotiation is particularly manifested in religious revivalist movements among Indian diasporic groups in the US, where the socio-historic and economic distinctions between the two countries are reconciled to give rise to a form of diasporic nationalism. The invocation of nationalistic sentiments among Indian diasporic communities in the US is carried out through various avenues, of which we read here about the practice of re-writing Indian history through an inclusion of religious elements. There has been a proliferation of historical documents produced by the HSS in the US in recent years that have raised concerns among Indian historians about the validity of these documents, the disciplinary skills of their writers and finally their popularity among their audience. It is this third factor of ‘popularity’ which could be explained here as ‘persuasive’ and ‘communicative’ abilities of such
historiography that needs to be explored. That is not to say that questions about their authenticity and skillfulness is not crucial, however it should also be taken into account that the purpose of these texts are to achieve political ends. Therefore, while the objectivity of the writer fades from view, the rhetorical possibilities of such religio-political historiography grab our attention. It is thus important to look upon the production of these histories as both political and nationalistic in its aim and the ways in which the HSS convey these texts to revive religious nationalism among diasporic audiences. I initiate my discussion here with an explanation of the nature of alternative historiographies that have come into focus within the academic discipline of history, as mediums of non-elite nationalism and the controversies lying therein.

As I mentioned earlier, to many people this form of religious resurgence is a reaction against modernity. Modernity in the post-enlightenment sense of the term usually means “rule of institutions that delivered us from the thrall of all that was unreasonable and irrational” (Chakraborty). Dipesh chakraborty suggests that such a definition is delimiting since it immediately identifies some people, practices and concepts as non-modern or premodern especially those who fall outside its ambit. Equating such notions of modernity as concurrent with ideas of progress led western powers to rampanty assume most of the non-European world as lagging behind in time when mapped on a linear scale of development\textsuperscript{18}. Historiographic debates conducted by a group of subaltern historiographers from South Asia address the process of introduction of the so called realm of the traditional into that of the modern as complicating ideas of postcolonial historiography. By traditional I mean here those ideas of gods, spirits,

\textsuperscript{18} A hint of which could possibly be detected in the HSS historians argument that it was important for Orientalist historiographers to establish a teleological scale to map Indian historicity.
religion, magic etc that constitute as much an integral part of India as its political institutions of statehood and democracy. Acknowledging this as not just a simple binary of traditional and modern, Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to such dichotomies present in the democratic conscience of India as some of the most challenging questions facing Indian modernity. The coexistence of such traditional and modern ideologies in the contemporary democratic world forces us to rethink the distinction set between the religious and the sacred, the rational and the non-rational.

Through a close reading we see that this strong split between emotion and reason also works in varied ways into the rhetorical structures of the historical narratives as written by HSS historians. In my reading of these texts I have tried to illuminate that the purpose of history is more than just to inform and that in the hands of the HSS, history provides an interesting juncture of reconciliation of the tradition and modern. The traditional elements in this case manifests itself through religious practices as performed by ancient Hindu rulers, their policies of governance especially catering to the needs of a Hindu majority and a reinvention of cultural rituals and customs performed during the reign of Hindu rulers about two thousand years ago that ensures the rights of Hindus. Concurrently aspects of political modernity like citizenship, sovereignty, democratic and republican forms of government are not usurped to replace with traditional monarchical forms. So while in one hand the modern forms of democratic and republican government edifices are retained on the other hand Hindu religious values are imposed on minorities if at all they are allowed within national territories. Reasonably, this would give voting and decision making rights to the Hindus who would then implement cabinets that resembles Ram Rajya or the kingdom of Ram. Since the HSS history texts are made
available to diverse groups – both the uneducated and sometimes illiterate farmer from rural India and the elite upper middle class nonresidential Indian – the narrative is shaped by the demography of audience who are simultaneously made aware of and persuaded by the significance of religion in Indian cultural life. As a result, rhetorical structures embedded within non-western political discursive terrains - as that of India - contain an amicable juxtaposition of the abovementioned modern and non-modern elements. We therefore find ourselves asking: is there even such a conflict existent in Indian religious nationalistic discourse? It is indeed interesting to see religion and its various anthropomorphic participants rhetorically or persuasively deployed to invoke images of a higher order that descend on earth to legitimize wars on contemporary social political or even national policies. By transcribing this dichotomy in public speeches of religio-political organizations who seek to bring about a radical change in the intervention of political modernity and its capitalist economies, the HSS discourse reveals aspects of contemporary non-western rhetorical practices that have hitherto been unnoticed. Although forms of rewriting the history of the nation, race and religion has been talked about much in postcolonial scholarship they have mostly been seen through lenses of secular historiographies. Within the post-enlightenment, liberal, secular bourgeoisie and often Marxist theoretical debates involved in postcolonial scholarships one finds very little space devoted to religious resurgent groups. The non-scientific accounts of history – or writing histories without historical proofs – as practiced by Hindu religious groups are infamous for their absurd claims on historical facts. Their dogmatic approach to religious nationalism, often ridiculed and derided within notions of secular scholarships, however is transformed into effective tools of persuasion within a certain group of Indians both in
India and abroad. Understanding the protocol of such rhetorical practices will therefore not only add newer perspectives to diversify the cannon of rhetoric but also enliven discussions generally within the discipline of postcolonial studies to understand the material realities of the postcolonial world that is now torn between globalization and religious resurgence.  

Both Dipesh Chakraborty and Partha Chatterjee, noted subaltern historiographers, refer to the limitations of post-enlightenment historicisms where historical developments were mapped on a linear time scale and categorized into various stages. Objecting to such stagist theory of histories of nations, towards the second half of the nineteenth century a group of historians from India decried about the lack of an Indian historiography of India, as “it was an agenda for self-representation, for setting out to claim for the nation a past that was not distorted by foreign interpreters” (Chatterjee 76). In a strictly disciplinary sense, this was looked upon as an opportunity to break out of colonialist modes of writing histories and democratize historiography. One of the main projects that emerged from this paradigmatic shift in postcolonial historiography is a reorientation of the category of the ‘subaltern’ including peasants, workers or tribals and the history of their resistance to colonialism in India. This history was markedly distinct from other forms of colonial resistance that the subaltern studies historiographers denote as elite or mainstream opposition. The conflict arose as nationalism and colonialism, surfacing as two major areas of research in modern Indian history, drew two extreme sets of critical opinions from Indian historians. These historians, either saw nationalism as the work of a handful of elite who were trained by British educational institutions in India and thus collaborated

Ironically, as I was writing this chapter the results from the general elections in Palestine were published and we see yet another religious organization demarcated as ‘terrorists’ by the US coming into the forefront of global politics.
with the British in their search for power and knowledge or argued that since colonialism was nothing but a regressive force that resulted only in social economic and political degeneration of Indian life, nationalism transpired as the only regenerative force that necessarily mobilized sentiments of unity among the Indians to fight against a common enemy. Caught in between these two extreme versions of Indian nationalism during colonial rule, was the ‘role of the poor’ (peasants, workers and tribals) who as it seemed were suppressed “with a heavy hand” by nationalist leaders who saw the peasant’s rebellion as a “tendency to exceed the self-imposed limits of the nationalist political agenda by protesting the oppression meted out to them, not only by the British, but by the indigenous ruling groups as well” (chakraborty 6). As subaltern historiographers intervened into this terrain, they critiqued both the abovementioned schools of nationalistic historiographies as elitist. Giving the subaltern his/her agency to contribute in the development of the nation that is independent of the nationalist elite, “to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny” was at the core of the Subaltern Studies project.

Such a rendition of nationalism, one that for the first time in the history of Indian historiography granted autonomous agency to the marginalized peasants, workers or tribals, sought to reconsider conventional notions of the ‘political’. The question of the ‘political’, plays a decisive role in all forms of non-mainstream nationalism including that of religious nationalism that I have set out to discuss in this chapter. A formal manifestation of the political is often seen in governmental institutional processes, which incorporates ideologies and activities of those who were directly connected to the running of these institutions, conflating the political with the bureaucratic elite. At another plane,
the existence of the ‘political’ beyond the institutional framework can be uncovered. In case of subaltern historiography, the range of the political includes those instances of peasant revolts that were organized along the lines of kinship, religion and caste. Until the era of 1970’s, Indian historiography along with their global Marxist counterparts looked upon such alliances as that of the subaltern with his/her religion as backward or pre-political. Historicizing such movements as ones that constituted nothing but backward consciousness, the historiographers saw these struggles as ones that had “not quite come to terms with the institutional logic of modernity and capitalism” (Chakravarty 9). The subaltern historiographer’s characterization and explicit rejection of such consciousness prevalent among marginalized communities in India chiefly in the face of colonial domination gave birth to a new constellation of the term ‘political’. In this nascent domain of subaltern politics, “mobilization for political intervention depended on horizontal affiliations” such as the traditional organizations of kinship and territoriality or on “class consciousness” depending upon the level of consciousness of people involved (Chakraborty 8). By raising questions about the enforcement of political power through elite institutional frameworks in India that were merely adaptations of British parliamentary policies, the Subaltern Studies group fundamentally exposed the mechanics of political power in non-Western postcolonial modernities. The narratives of such power structures, as the one we see in the study of Hindu religious insurgence, splits up the political arena into two distinct trends of acquisition of power. In the first of these two trends, we see the operations of legal and secular frameworks of government whereas the second trend contradicts the secular bureaucracy of the former and tightens its grip on all that is influenced and dominated by the course of religion. The history of the
resurgence of Hindu Right in India, both during and after colonial rule vehemently resists a clear distinction between the modern political and that of the non-modern or pre-political. Rather, one could argue that the Hindu resurgent politics in India clearly demonstrates a mutual coexistence of both the global institutional and indigenous narratives of political struggle. Convincing its audience that the legal secular political structure of India failed to tell the story of the nation correctly, the Hindu Right self-appoints its members with a kind of political agency to bring out the collective imagining of a nation that overreaches the boundaries of the political. This collective vision of the nation is then imbricated and presented in numerous rituals, customs and cultural practices of a selective group of people who still find themselves uncertain about the operatives of bourgeois ideological forms of power. It is indeed interesting that the political as expressed in the HSS/RSS historiography, caters to two divergent groups of audience one who actively partake in the capitalist modes of production and those that are yet to reap the benefits of such methods and therefore are politically and economically removed from it.

As the subaltern studies project found yet another political category among the workers, peasants and tribals’ rebellion against imperialist forces, they also rejected the stagiest idea of history that promoted peasant consciousness as backward or prepolitical abiding to an evolutionary model of consciousness. But the most distinguishing feature of subaltern resistance to elitist forms of nationalism is the inclusion of religion or supernatural agents, a unique ideology that raised considerable concern regarding the nature and use of political power in non-western democracies. This incorporation of forces beyond the control of human subjectivity is neither premodern nor precolonial and
is a fundamental socio-cultural reality of Indian democratic life that is repeatedly manifested in its political discourse be it through the oppressed subaltern or the elite Hindu Right\textsuperscript{20}. My interest in discussing the birth and case of subaltern historiography is only to argue that such pockets of problematic power structures still exist within the democratic, political and capitalistic forces of modernity in India. It is this struggle for power between religious fundamentalism and secular nationalism that draws my attention in this chapter. The nature of Hindutva historiography has been claimed as unhistorical, devoid of evidence and logic by most noted historians. That the writers of such histories have little to no disciplinary training is acutely evident from the vast gaps in their knowledge structures, the ways in which they conflate historical periods only to drive home the point of Hindu origins. Since the contents of religious histories of India as written by Hindu fundamentalist organizations have been rejected abjectly within the academic discipline of history writing, nevertheless they have constituted a parallel course of producing historical documents. Chakraborty’s argument to include subaltern historiography within the larger thematic patterns of writing histories of the nations is now available to elite urban communities of social scientists and humanities for most part due to such inclusions. Religious nationalistic historiography in India should also be a part of such readings of pluralistic notions of modernity, since they constitute a compelling result of such notions, no matter how hodgepodge their intellectual endeavors are. The neglect of Hindutva history of India from the disciplinary domains of history as well as postcolonial studies renders it as beyond scrutiny to the followers of Hindutva. Even though we are in agreement about the illogical and non-historic pursuit of such

\textsuperscript{20} It should be taken into consideration that though the leaders of Hindu Right organizations like HSS and RSS assume elitist roles, most of its congregation members in India at least are oppressed people from rural areas. Religion has been instrumental in persuading them to become members of this organization.
historiographies we should bear in mind that our disclaimer forces such documents to be widely circulated as indisputable. As I have tried to show in my reading of these texts that there are certain patterns of value-laden beliefs like continuity, resistance, unbroken lineage, redefinition, compilation and finally ‘chronologization’ that seems pivotal in weaving the narrative of the history of the nation. And that they portray certain irreducible facts regarding the role of religion in the collective national psyche of India. Their widespread and continually growing acceptance among Indians from various classes and geographical locations are evidences of their rhetorical success.

The subaltern historiographers’ call for a democratization of the historiographic process has opened up debates of alternative or plural modernities. The first step towards an understanding of plural modernities thus should begin with peeling off any such value-laden judgment that underscores our treatment of the traditional. Dipesh Chakraborty comments that though concepts like premodern, nonmodern or backward have suffered degeneration and is now left with very little value it enjoyed in the 19th and early 20th century, nevertheless these ideas still constitute historicist tropes- as stagiest ideas of history where modernity is evaluated only on the basis of teleological progression. It is therefore not surprising that discussions on democracy and development are continually interspersed with ideas of historical progress, of moving away from traditional values that are often exemplified in religious fanaticism. I had started my discussion in this chapter by emphasizing how the Hindu Right advocacy in both India and the US is checkered by appropriations of tradition/ modernity conflicts. I continue to ask or how else does an army of monkey gods and divine sprits accommodate at once members of industrial capitalist as well as agricultural semi-feudal economies?
CHAPTER 4

Maharashtra, Ontario, New Jersey… The Argumentative Indian at Home and Abroad

Theories of political rhetoric have always placed a high premium, on the diverse roles of political expression, like public speech, discourse and reasoned debate to name a few, as the key to democratic politics. Current debates within the theories of political rhetoric have therefore, focused on the consequences of viewing politics as a mode of linguistic activity, that is, as a form of symbolic and rational communication. Due to the shared emphasis on discourse and history, in both deliberative democracies and political rhetoric, we consider the possibilities of the influences of history of rhetorical theory on understanding democratic political processes. Rhetoric in classical terms is conceived predominantly as an art of persuasion that addresses both public and private speech whether written or oral. During the first thousand years of its existence as a disciplinary topic, rhetoric has sometimes been lauded as an essential element in basic education and careers in public affairs, while condemned at certain periods of history for its demagoguery and deceptive nature. In all this however, rhetoric was seen as especially amenable to democratic values and beliefs.
The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is twofold. First, it examines the aforementioned relationship between rhetoric and democratic politics by looking at the shifting nature of the concepts and theories of rhetoric and democracy, especially within the South-Asian context. Second, it introduces Indian religious models, for understanding the strengths and limitations of the history of Western political rhetoric and its relevance in postcolonial India.

If we were to ask ourselves, “what constitutes the rhetorical tradition of India”, we would have to be, I am afraid, satisfied with a rather vague response. Such a response, as I see it, is a result of primarily the multicultural and multireligious nature of Indian social life, which is antithetical to any one tradition or model. Secondly, ‘rhetoric’, construed as a tradition of ‘heterodoxy’ within this context, reflects institutionalized as well as local practices of debates, arguments, skepticism and other forms of dissent and protest. And finally, these forms of public discussions in India were uniquely ensconced in both religious and secular spheres, sometimes not being easily distinguishable. Therefore, it is indeed difficult to provide a structured response to the question of a singular rhetorical tradition of India, and that as we shall see is a good thing.

So far, in the last two chapters of this dissertation, I have attempted to discuss through an analysis of the construction of myth and history in the HSS discursive practices, the nature and role of religious discourse in everyday Indian life. Following up on this ubiquitous nature of religion in India, I argue in this chapter that contrary to the view that rhetoric evolved most prudently and flourished most abundantly in democratic politics, Indian religious practices provided an egalitarian platform for the exchange of public opinions. Rhetoric within these religio-cultural practices surfaced continually as an
accepted medium of scholarly/philosophical and pragmatic/material interactive communication.

When Indians argue...

Amartya Sen – noted Nobel laureate in economics, in his recently published book titled *The Argumentative Indian*, draws attention to - as the title of his book suggests - the characteristics of argumentation in India. In his opinion, current trends in religious fanaticism across the world which also includes the Hindu Right in India, have been considerably effective in promulgating notions of religious and cultural impositions over a nation’s population that dissuade voicing of public opinion and freedom of speech.21 Sen’s book in response to such notions, attempts to revive the practice of what he calls ‘heterodoxy and dialogue’ prevalent among Indians since the Vedic times. Therefore Sen remarks,

The contemporary relevance of the dialogic tradition and the acceptance of heterodoxy is hard to exaggerate. Discussions and arguments are critically important for democracy and public reasoning. They are central to the practice of secularism and for even-handed treatment of adherents of different religious faiths (including those who have no religious beliefs). Going beyond these basic structural priorities, the argumentative tradition, if used with deliberation and commitment, can also be extremely important in resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation. Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice (13).

Sen’s argument is pertinent and applicable to almost all societies across the globe whether ancient or contemporary. His explication of the significance of dialogue and public reasoning in democracy includes equal treatment of adherents of different religious faiths. It is crucial to note here, that Sen’s examples are taken from politically

21 ideas that have tightly gripped the Western democratic psyche since the French Revolution.
democratic situations only. Furthermore, he writes to contradict common wisdom that dialectics is usually confined to the more affluent and literate, and assumed that it is of no value to the common people. Rather, he asserts, such a view implies political cynicism and is elitist in that it encourages certain impassivity among the underprivileged. In Sen’s view “the critical voice is the traditional ally of the aggrieved and participation in arguments is a general opportunity and not a specialized skill” (13).

The publication of Sen’s book is momentous, not only due to its comprehensive approach of the subject matter, but also being the first of its kind to establish the scope of argumentation in Indian public discourse. This book also revived and re-initiated the topic of oral communication in India, which continues to receive scant attention within the discipline of Rhetorical Studies. It is essential for me, to illustrate here some of the features of the argumentative tradition of India from classical antiquity to modern times, to reinforce my argument: that although the key to rhetorical success has always been ascertained through secular modes of persuasion, ‘religious democracy’ in India served a major purpose in the benefaction of free speech and debates.

Should democracy be always secular? Can there be religious approaches to democratic politics? What are the connections between Indian religious rhetoric and democratic politics? Generally, theories of democracy are intricately connected, to the emergence of people or masses as an active agent and force in history and politics. Some of these theories have been compelled, to address the role of the people in the equation between the state power and its legitimate application, and have arguably reduced political activity to mere economic behavior. While, others have enumerated the principles underlying modern democracy as being “voting, interest aggregation and
interest competition”(Fontana et al, 4). Nonetheless, they all share the classical commitment to a politics that looks to the common or civic pursuit of the public good. Finally, they all see political activity as an important element in developing a well-rounded and educated citizen. These are essential qualities, needed to maintain a public forum, in which businesses affecting all citizens can be conducted. Rendering all political activities as fundamentally secular and therefore belonging to the public sphere, these modes of democratic politics have informed and shaped our understanding of rhetoric as a form of public expression for political ideals. Religion, on the other hand, has always been the prerogative of the private and personal sphere and therefore, looked upon as necessarily antithetical to political democratic principles. These binaristic divisions, as I argue here, limits our understanding of the scope of religious approaches to political rhetoric, at the same time overdetermining tropes of ‘reason’ and ‘logic’ that are intricately associated with most theories of Western rhetorical traditions.

Deliberation, followed by action, has always assumed a pivotal position in constituting a public political space where speech and language, discussion and discourse played a central role in the political life of popular assemblies. Questions on the nature and status of deliberation and rational discussions, kept Gorgias, Plato, Isocrates and Aristotle preoccupied in deciphering the meaning of ‘logos’- whether it is a vehicle of philosophical reason or merely a technical rhetorical instrument used to persuade the masses. Whatever the true meaning of logos came to be adapted for, it unconditionally situated public discussion as the most substantive method by which equal and free citizens arrived rationally at issues concerning public good. The meaning of logos also recognized that language, speech and deliberation are always informed by reason and
argument and those outside the sphere of public deliberation are either nonrational or
undemocratic. This formulation of democratic deliberation, however, can be seen as too
narrow to encompass other politically and democratically important forms of public talk.
It not only systematically excludes, forms of public interaction other than discussion and
speech from the political sphere, but also presents a problem in seeing other social,
economic, cultural and religious expressions of the community as essentially
undemocratic.

Although Amartya Sen never even once draws comparison to the study of rhetoric
in Western philosophy and culture, in his book *The Argumentative Indian*, one cannot fail
to find similarities especially with issues of logic and reasoning associated with Western
classical readings of rhetoric. Even without the comparative element between Western
and Indian rhetorical traditions, Sen’s book categorizes certain landmarks in the
development of the argumentative tradition in India. For instance, he emphatically states
“Prolixity is not alien to India” and it should be firmly established that Indian “do like to
speak” (9). Such a claim, interestingly contradicts the following example from Robert
Oliver’s book *Communication and Culture in India and China*, which illustrates a
common error in reading culturally diverse rhetorical texts. The hermeneutical problems
of reading non-western rhetoric, is amply manifested in this scholarly work which is
often used in the discipline, as the starting point for understanding the rhetorical practices
of Asian cultures. A major limitation, frequently observed, in such a study is a repeated
attempt to look for familiarity, to assess and critique on the basis of one’s knowledge of
the rhetorical canon\(^\text{22}\). As it is evident in this case, Oliver’s analysis is both influenced

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\(^{22}\) The canon as I imply here refers to readings of certain texts in the discipline of rhetorical studies mostly
drawing from Western classical philosophy and culture.
and triggered by an urge to compare the socio-political configurations of these nations\textsuperscript{23} – often referred to as a homogenized entity – to that of Europe and America. Not surprisingly therefore, the first chapter states:

Neither India nor China has ever had a public platform comparable with that of America or of those European nations inclined towards democracy. Until very recently political debate in the whole area from Bombay to Peking was confined largely to court circles. There were no political parties, no election campaigns, no contending candidates arguing their issues before voters. Their courtrooms offered none of the inducements found in the West to affect judicial decisions through eloquent pleading. Although, evangelism was prominent in some Eastern religions, their temples of worship contained no pulpits in which weekly sermons were delivered. Their education did not feature what the West would consider to be lectures, though it encouraged student discussions. Despite the prominence for lecturing in early India and the Chinese penchant for talk, Eastern communities developed nothing comparable to the lyceum, the chautauquas, or the commercial lecture bureaus of the Western world.

In fact, Oliver critiqued Indian rhetorical system for precisely that which Sen emphasizes upon, in his claiming a long tradition in India of providing democratic opportunities for voicing public opinion.

It is indeed true that, all forms of public deliberations and public discussions require a public arena, which also interestingly constitutes as a rhetorical space for performances. This public space has been conventionally associated with public institutions, practices and interests that have emerged at the beginning of the modern era or as some would argue during the transformation from the feudal to the bourgeois society. As such, modern ‘civil societies’ consist of associations including cultural, social and political that are embedded within the administrative and economic apparatus of the state and are manifested through public deliberation about public ends. This model of civil society automatically renders premodern societies as lacking public space and

\textsuperscript{23} Namely India and China.
disengaged from public discussion. There are two elements missing from the 
aforementioned concept of civil societies that are most crucial to my discussion here, 
namely that of the politics of postcolonial nations and the role of religion in the face of 
democratic politics. The relationship between religion and public speech needs to be 
reexamined here as much as correlating religious faith as a matter of private domain and 
excluded from all forms public reasoning.

Opportunities to participate in democratic politics were made readily available, to 
everyone in classical Indian society, irrespective of their gender or caste. It is amply 
evident, that the participation of women in both political leadership and intellectual 
pursuits are not negligible even today, when women lead many dominant national as well 
as regional political parties in India. In ancient India too, we see instances of women 
participating in dialogues on public forum with other men and women. These dialogics 
are then made available to future participants and celebrated as valuable social texts. 
Amartya Sen states that, from the times of the writing of Upanishads to the struggle for 
India’s independence against British rule, we find evidences of renowned women public 
speakers that played leading roles in the political and social affairs of the country. One 
such occasion is explicitly described in the Brihadaryanaka Upanishad where a woman 
scholar named Gargi provided the “sharpest edge to the intellectual interrogation” (8). By 
using a strikingly military imagery in her speech, she described her immediate position 
as, “like the ruler of Videha or Kashi coming from a heroic line” she says “who strings 
his unstrung bow, takes in hand two penetrating arrows and approaches the enemy, so do 
I approach you with two questions, which you have to answer” (Sen, 8). It was in fact, 
another noted woman orator of the time, Maitreyi – the wife of an outstanding scholar
and teacher Yajnavalkya – who raised one of the most profound questions that pervades and keeps recurring in Hindu philosophy and thought, “what should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?” As with the inclusion of women’s voices, the argumentative tradition in India also encouraged questioning of orthodox beliefs and skepticism of unconditional trust of traditions. This can be observed in the stories of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata where it is repeatedly manifested that caste divisions are not meant to be discriminatory on the basis of race, color or any other physical attribute but rather on the basis of occupational skills, and moreover it should not restrict mobility between the four castes.

This tradition of continuing deliberation and public reasoning has been particularly influential in the development of political democracy in India along with other social equalities. Yet, not unlike other post-colonial nations, democracy in India is often seen as a byproduct of the wave of political modernity that stirred Europe, in the 19th and 20th centuries and was channeled to its colonies through the urban, elite and in this case, British educated young Indian men. This rationalization of the advent of democracy in postcolonial states, fails to do justice to the existing political systems of those countries prior to colonization. Now, there is a general consensus that public reasoning and discussions sowed the seeds of democracy, in all societies across the globe. In India too, therefore, it is not too difficult to trace a trajectory of the development of political democratic principles from the argumentative tradition discussed so far. Some social and economic theorists like Amartya Sen however, notes a caveat against proposing that it is the uniqueness of Indian history that makes it singularly suited to democracy. Just as we argue, that democracy did not arrive in India at a suitable moment.
through British imperialist modes, it could be institutionalized and preserved for more than fifty years since the country’s independence due to its own tradition of public interactive reasoning system. This public interactive reasoning system, which can be seen in most cultures or societies across the globe, laid the foundations of contemporary tenets of democracy. Political democracy, as we shall see here, necessitates more than the right to vote. It is therefore, as important to establish the system of ballots, as it is to ensure that one also gets the opportunity of public discussions to come to the right decision of casting the ballot. The ballot is an instrument, albeit important, whose success truly lies in warranting a democratic process through which the public can come to a decision about a political candidate. Hence, as in India the “the role of the argumentative tradition applies not merely to the public expression of values, but also to the interactive formation of values, illustrated for example by the emergence of the Indian form of secularism” (Sen, 14).

Linking democracy with secularism is pivotal to the context of my discussion here. The roads leading to democratic argumentative traditions, as we have seen here, inevitably exemplify secularist approaches, constructing a unilinear relationship between democracy and secularism while almost undermining its operations within a religious framework, as in ancient India. For instance, one can look at debates conducted in Buddhist Councils in India, the most famous of which was held in third century BCE under the royal patronage of emperor Ashoka who ruled most of the country from his capital Pataliputra in the northern-central provinces. Ashoka’s championing of the spread of Buddhism has been acclaimed as much as this noble emperor’s encouragement of

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24 Ashoka sent his son and daughter as Buddhist bhikshuks over to South-East Asia for promoting peace and Buddhist ideals for the only time in the history of Indian religions.
public discussions among various religious groups to resolve differences in religious principles and practices. With a keen eye on conducting these discursive forums as democratically as possible, Ashoka laid down strict rules about honoring opposing viewpoints, restraining oneself from inappropriate criticism of one’s own sect or others and took all precautionary measures to avoid any form of animosity between the delegates of different religious backgrounds. Like Ashoka, Akbar - another great Mughal emperor of India who ruled about two thousand years after Ashoka – revealed a similar inclination towards establishing dialogues between adherents of different religious beliefs. Akbar’s policy of bridging the gaps between diverse religious practices in India through amicable discussions and reasoning was indeed a commendable milestone in Indian history and politics. As Sen remarks, “Akbar’s overreaching thesis that ‘the pursuit of reason’ rather than ‘reliance on tradition’ is the way to address difficult problems of social harmony included a robust celebration of reasoned dialogues” (16).

Both Akbar and Ashoka’s efforts were somewhat similar, in that they recognized the essential role of freedom of expression and views in augmenting religious accord. Given the cultural diversity of India, the challenge they realized depended on a peaceful coexistence of diverse religious groups one that would prove enormously beneficial for the integrity of the nation in future. It should be borne in mind, that the thoughtfulness of both these emperors were not isolated examples, rather practices endorsed through religious texts. While Ashoka converted to Buddhism after winning the battle of Kalinga and was one of the most learned and just rulers of India, Akbar stands out as an exceptionally democratic Muslim king who extended alliances with other Hindu rulers of

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25 The war was decisive in making Ashoka realize the violence and atrocity inflicted through imperialist tendencies so that he embraced a non-violent method of ruling over his kingdom.
India and maintained religious harmony between the Muslim and Hindu subjects. Their attempts to strive and reach beyond their own religious faiths undoubtedly locate them at the forefront of the harbingers of democracy in India. I would like to emphasize here that this promotion of religious tolerance has been in the past and continues to be instrumental and foundational for the growth and development of the argumentative tradition of India.

The religious tolerance that we discussed earlier is distinctive from a rejection or exclusion of religion, from public affairs. Pluralistic religious practices, as imbibed and promoted by Ashoka and Akbar, came to be reflected in their political decisions and social policies. So, it was not surprising that “secularism in contemporary India, which received legislative formulation in the post-independence constitution of the Indian Republic, contains strong influences of Indian intellectual history, including the championing of intellectual pluralism” (Sen, 19). The most distinctive feature of this form of secularism is its focus on certain “neutrality between different religions”, as opposed to “the prohibition of religious associations in state activities”, which as Sen argues, is a key element of the more austere Western versions of secularism. This ‘neutrality’ faction of secularism entails, that the state be equally removed from all religious beliefs and practices, that it should never take sides or give precedence to one religious group over another. The ideological parameter of this ‘neutrality’, however, does not claim that the state should dissociate itself from all religious matters whatsoever. It rather ensures that “in so far as the state has to deal with different religions and members of different religious communities, there must be a basic symmetry of treatment” (Sen, 296). Studying this long history of heterodoxy, Sen confirms that this has also richly contributed to the emergence of secularism in India.
My contention here is against the practice of an overzealous secularism, to counter ‘excessive religiosity’, that yields little to no results for peaceful coexistence within diversity. It is true that there are multiple discontents to secularism and that it has come under verbal attack by members of conservative and progressive groups alike. Indian political rhetorics do not evince any obvious neutrality or apathy towards matters of religious consequence, and as such it is not too difficult to discern the insufficiency of a neutralist secular position. Particularly, while mapping the evolution of the argumentative tradition of India in contemporary times. Within the boundaries of this neutrality, we far too often lose track of the skepticism, ardent questioning and tolerance of opposing viewpoints, which this tradition had symbolized in the past. The Hindutva rhetoric that I have discussed in this dissertation bears no resemblance with the tradition of heterodoxy that seems to have been prevalent in India for thousands of years. But even so, too frequently we see discursive techniques practiced by religio-political groups like the HSS/RSS undermined for their conservative views, at the risk of ignoring the relevance of their increasing popularity among the non-elite sections of Indian population, or urban educated diasporic communities. In order to explore the implications of these discursive techniques of the RSS/HSS, we first need to recognize the location of religion within the cultural matrix of Indian social life.

The tradition of religious skepticism in India often surfaces, ironically, among its progressive intellectuals and scholars who see an excess of religious representation in most of its affairs. Arguably, this has been fanned to a great extent by numerous religious riots since the partition of India in 1947, it is enriched by repeated terrorist activities caused in the name of religious heritage and authenticity, and finally it has been blown to
great proportions with the revival of conservatism through Hindutva politics and the coming of power of the BJP government (the political wing of the RSS in India) in 1996. Noting the succession of these events, it is not unseemly to think that India’s religiosities outmaneuvers its secular principles. The Hindu revivalist movements should not, however, draw our attention away from Indian religious practices and the argumentative traditions that flourished within it. Far from being aggressive, parochial and belligerent as Hindutva discourse exemplifies, Indian argumentative tradition respected differences of opinion, skepticism and interactive reasoning. I have tried to discuss in the last few chapters the complex role of religion in Indian social life, indicating a loosely tied intricate body of knowledge and practices suggestive of multiple ways of living with no fear of being conscripted to ‘eternal damnation’. Religion is everywhere in India, if one wishes to see it as so and yet it can be easily avoided. It is as much an intellectual experience as ontological, it is alluring while at the same time being self-evading.

These dichotomies in the nature of religion in India have lead, to certain uncertainties among a group of Indian intellectuals who displayed - as Dipesh Chakraborty once referred to – a kind of post-enlightenment hyper-rationalism, and avoided any scholarly projects in the area. In disciplinary methodologies too, binaries were set up between religious and secular scholarships, and they hardly ever crossed each other’s paths. My discussion so far on the nature of religion and secularism in India is an attempt to deconstruct such binaries. India’s intellectual and social engagement with religion is the central issue of my argument here, for in it I see the rise and growth of a complex and fascinating political rhetorical movement, a pattern of argumentation and
persuasion, the real potential of which would be difficult to ascertain if we categorize them through binaristic oppositions. As Sen admits,

Indian texts include elaborate religious expositions and protracted defence. They also contain lengthy and sustained debates among different religious schools. But there are, in addition, a great many controversies between defenders of religiosity on one side, and advocates of general skepticism on the other. The doubts sometimes take the form of agnosticism, sometimes that of atheism, but there is also Gautama Buddha’s special strategy of combining his theoretical skepticism about God with a practical subversion of the significance of the question by making the choice of good behavior completely independent of any God – real or imagined. Indeed, different forms of godlessness have had a strong following throughout Indian history, as they do today (23).

The pervasive and exaggerated focus on religiosity that many scholars on South Asian politics, economics, culture and society scorn at is actually a product of a neo-conservative political advocacies like those put forward by the Hindutva group. This is not to say, that much of India’s problems today are not connected with this all-pervasive religiosity, which some fundamentalist groups have come to see as the essential ethos of the country. The history of India in the twentieth century is ridden with strife and conflicts over religious determinacy, which has led to religious riots and even the partition of India, on the basis of religion. But it is also true, that science and philosophy, religiosity and atheism were commingled and celebrated equally in ancient Indian texts. Keeping this tradition in mind one should not see Indian argumentative tradition through the lens of either religio-rhetorical or secular political rhetorics (whether neutral or austere) only, but largely through a religio-cultural kaleidoscope. This has been my motivation for analyzing the discourse of the HSS in this dissertation, to comprehend the complex rhetoricity of these political discursive patterns that get tacitly translated among diverse groups of audience cutting through class, language and gender divisions.
Consequently, the political rhetorical tradition of India should also evolve out of its vast body of literature that is as much religious as secular, as much cultural as social. One such text that I would especially like to discuss here in this light is the Bhagavad Gita – arguably a seminal text in Hindu religious literature. In my reading of the rhetorical structures of certain moments from the text of the Gita, I would like to emphasize the juxtaposition of both religious and political ideals and examine the scope of such co-existences. Furthermore, in these readings I attempt to explore the emerging patterns of democratic deliberations, which mutually pervaded religious private spheres and political public spaces of India.

As the Songs unfold

The oeuvre of modern rhetorical theory, which, in its present form, is practiced predominantly within western academia, is grounded on the dynamics of an analysis of the mode of discourse innovated in Greece in 5th century BC. In subsequent years, it has developed not only to be a centripetal force and the foundation of later developments in rhetoric in the West but also the yardstick on the basis of which other rhetorical traditions, including those from the non-western worlds, continue to be assessed. Such assessments, meager as they are in terms of their oeuvre, naturally fail to do justice to the models they are studying due to the fact that they are carried out with the awareness of the Western models as forming the dominant discourse. A ‘tradition’ of South Asian rhetorics therefore cannot be developed by a process of contradistinction to its western forms but rather should be treated autonomously.
The earliest instances of a rhetorical tradition of India, it should be emphasized here, dates back to about 5th century BC when the Vedas and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata were compiled and transcribed but composed about a few centuries prior to that as an oral mode of communication. In this section, I would like to distinguish the nature of dialectical reasoning embedded in Indian religious texts and how this particular text reveals the scope of the orator and his audience in such oral traditions. As Romila Thapar states in her essay The Oral and the Written in Early India that the oral traditions in India had two distinct trajectories around the first millennium BC namely “a carefully preserved oral tradition and a relatively free oral tradition” (196), which was maintained even when the composition took a literate form. These differences are extensively visible between the Vedic texts and the epics even after converted to written forms. The sound of Vedic hymns were supremely important and any mispronunciation could effectively ruin the purpose of a ritual. So, a careful preservation of these specific sounds was a primarily consideration while these traditional hymns were taught to newer generations. Worshipping the god of speech Vach was also fairly popular during this time as the power of knowledge or Brahma could be transmitted only through rightful speech and sound. Linking the chain between man and god speech “was the method by which valuable knowledge needed to make the social order run smoothly” (Gangal and Hosterman, 279) could be conveyed. Not unlike other ancient societies “the priests were the protectors of knowledge and hence thought to be the most skilled in the art of communication” (279). As a result, preservation of oral traditions was also guaranteed through large-scale memorization. A lot of these hymns were taught to students in

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26 Though I keep referring to a ‘tradition’ I do not mean a monolithic body of texts devoted for this purpose only. Rather this is only a selection of similar texts that are also closely dissimilar in other ways.
gurukuls or schools for brahmans only over a long period of time through rigorous training in learning and committing to memory. This was a significant stepping-stone for the young Brahman since it was a hallmark of good training and sanctifying the role of the priests in society as the most educated and intellectual class.

Dissemination of knowledge was therefore a fundamental cause for communication and as such all literature of this period technically belongs to the class of ‘shruti’—orally transmitted knowledge or text leading to ‘smriti’, texts that are conducive to memorization. It is notable how ‘speech’, held in high esteem as an essential social tool, predominantly conveyed an oral form of communication combining literature, religion, and philosophy. Though there are no treatises written during this period on the practice of rhetoric, a prominent rhetorical tradition is manifest from the congregation of religious texts written during the Vedic and post-Vedic times. Reciting from the epics required a new set of distinction altogether. To begin with, they belonged to the free oral tradition and thus were not bound by the meticulous memorization and training that we saw influenced much of the Vedic oral traditions. A reason for their apparent uncontrolled existence was that they were originally composed by bards or sutas who sang them from one royal court concert to another or large gatherings on the performance of a sacrificial ritual. New verses and ideas were freely interpolated into the text and manifested the aesthetic mastery of the bard and continued to be so even after these compositions were transcribed to written texts. Thapar observes that curiously enough, even after the advent of literacy the centrality of the sacred text in Hindu religious tradition remained limited. Even the brahmans—or the priestly class—would be classified as rooted in the conventions of sruti or that which is heard and smriti—that which is memorized. The
interpretations of texts rather than the texts themselves emerge to be more significant in the communication of religious values. As has been agreed by most contemporary Indian scholars, the study of the Gita as the quintessential Hindu text is a much more recent phenomenon, probably since the discipline of Indology became popular during the latter half of the twentieth century.

All of this is to explain the cultural context that encouraged the expansion of public reasoning and argumentation in India. Religion as I have mentioned earlier was integral to the development of heterodoxy since it delineated a usual course for acquiring knowledge. In this tradition, to be spiritual one need not reject reason but could go beyond it. Intellectual speculation would invariably lead to a better understanding of the workings of the ‘universe’ and its microcosmic element – society based on the Hindu ways of life – while appreciating philosophy and religion to be two aspects of a single movement. Arguably therefore, the ensuing rhetorical model though developed on the basis of rhetoric pertaining to religious texts can also be implemented for the evaluation of secular rhetoric in India. It is generally believed that the Bhagavad-Gita first achieved its literate form in and around 5th century BC and had been continually modified with interpolations for the next few centuries, though its oral composition took place a few hundred years earlier. The Gita, epitomizing a moral dilemma faced by Arjuna a renowned prince from the epic Mahabharata in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, is in essence a series of dialogues exchanged between Krishna and his friend Arjuna consummating in the illumination of notions about the cosmic order of living beings and their existence through the cycle of time. Gangal and Hosterman indicate the primacy of the rhetoric in ancient India in the preservation of cultural values and the reconciliation of
divergent spiritual and moral interpretations of life. Indeed, the complex doctrinal structure of the *Gita* synchronizes elements of rhetoric and philosophy thus taking a broad integrative view of life. The dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna is mostly persuasive or dialogic which forms the substance of the narrative. Subsequently, this rhetorical situation was contrived not necessarily for teaching various techniques or styles of argumentation but ensuring that through reasoning one could come to locate the relevance of a crisis-laden condition and thus determine the best course of action that can be undertaken to resolve it. A summary of the story of the *Gita* would help here. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, popularly known as the *Gita*, constitutes only a small fraction of the longest Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The *Gita* translated as *The Songs of the Lord* comprises of a chain of dialogues between Krishna and Arjuna. The moment embodies a crisis faced by Arjuna in the battlefield where members of two branches of the same royal family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, equipped for a ferocious battle, confront each other over the issue of who might be the rightful owner of the kingdom. Arjuna, the middle brother of the Pandavas and their military leader, looks upon the impending army, envisions the predicament and is filled with remorse and misgiving. He refuses to fight against his own family members, questioning the purpose of such bloodshed. Krishna - who is actually an incarnation of Vishnu an important member of the Hindu trinity - Arjuna’s ally and compatriot, the charioteer of his horses, rises from his seat to answer Arjuna’s questions and convince and impel him to his responsibilities. The setting of the battlefield contributes a dramatic element to the book and relates religion to the materiality of living conditions while conferring a spiritual quality to its discourse that
has been noted by many commentators of the text. In his translation B Krishna Murthy writes,

The Bhagavad-Gita coalesces drama and philosophy, poetry and religion. As the pivotal moment in the colossal tragedy, it evokes the correct spiritual memory of Indian civilization as embodied by the reflection and insight of Sri Krishna. The event takes place in a state of suspended animation. The dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna requires the stoppage of all activity. A stoppage that is symbolic of and metaphorical for the cessation of conventional concerns to allow the emergence of the highest consciousness"(2).

For some, the text of the Gita can be viewed as a pedagogical guidebook composed solely for edifying the general population of society, a literary text based on realism rather than mythology. If we continually look upon Krishna’s attempts to convince Arjuna as divine speech, it raises questions on the status, authority and persuasive intensity that are always already contained in the position of the orator. Or so to say, we ask ourselves, can gods ever fail to persuade? To be able to see it as a rhetorical and philosophical text therefore, the narrative paradigm that defines the context of the Gita needs to be further elucidated. The text starts with the words of Sanjay; a significant yet often overshadowed character of the epic who narrates the events of the battlefield to the blind king Dhritarashtra who could not participate in the battle due to his disability. In fact the entire text of the Gita is seen through the eyes of Sanjay who is interestingly removed from the actual scene of events. As a form of reported speech, the Gita is therefore revealed to its audience only as Sanjay reveals it to the blind king Dhritarashtra. Recreating the scene of the battle outside the battlefield gives the readers of the Gita an objectivity, which is highly desired if one wants to evaluate the dialogues between the two primary characters outside a religious context. Also, it is important to note that prior to this complex moment in the battle, none of the characters had a clear
idea of the anthropomorphic existence of Krishna, which had been exposed only intermittently throughout the epic but heavily shrouded in playful magic. It is in the context of the argumentation with Arjuna that Krishna grants him the vision of the cosmic world only to convince Arjuna about the consequences of his actions. Within this enlightening vision does Arjuna see the true form of Krishna as a divine entity, the preserver of the universe? Without this knowledge made apparent in the succession of events leading up to the battle there was no possibility of granting Krishna any divine status that would make the outcome of the argumentation between Arjuna and Krishna preordained. Next to this main dialogue between the two major protagonists of the epic we see the dialogues between Sanjay and Dhritarashtra, which almost results in the construction of a subsidiary text within the primary verses. Being doubly distanced from the actual dialogues – seen through the eyes of Sanjay – every other audience of the text might find themselves more akin to the position of the blind king, who anyway is debilitated by being cripple and cannot be biased about Krishna’s divine position since he cannot really see it. A positive implication of this disability ensures that the songs of the Gita are to be ‘heard’ than to be ‘seen’, that it be orally communicated and that the authority of the texts of the sruti traditions is maintained.

Moral dilemmas are not uncommon in Indian epics. They serve a perfect pretext to start a dialogue and whether the consequences of such a dialogue are positive or not it is refreshing to know indeed that one had the opportunity to listen and counterbalance miscellaneous views. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata are replete with dialogues, dilemmas and alternative perspectives that are woven into the narrative through a chain of stories that are connected to a primary tale. Ram, the protagonist of the Ramayana is
also an incarnation of Vishnu who came on earth about a few millennia before Krishna. Though technically omnipotent, he took certain injudicious decisions during his lifetime and in spite of being revered and worshipped is also criticized for his actions in the story and remains a remorse and dejected figure at the end of the epic. Similarly, although Krishna escorts Arjuna through the intricacies of actions and results in the Gita, at the end of the *Mahabharata* Krishna loses his entire family and kingdom and dies by the arrow of a hunter. These gods themselves perceptibly choose the ends of gods on earth. But strikingly, they do not emerge as victorious always and one gets a lingering sense of the impermanence of results of any actions as one finishes reading the last pages of the epic. Coupled with this is a feeling that it is only possible to act according to one’s best judgment and intentions but that these are always open to interpretations and that skepticism hangs eternally around every decision. As Arjuna is weighed down by wretchedness, confused about what is right and wrong, he is driven not only by despair, anxiety and doubt but also by an ardent wish for certainty. He thus seeks guidance from Krishna,

> my very being is stricken with the weakness of sentimental pity; with my mind bewildered about my duty I ask Thee. Tell me, for certain, which is better? I am Thy pupil; teach me who am seeking refuge in Thee (2:7).

Krishna accepts Arjuna’s invitation to instruct and tries to galvanize him out of his disenchantment by educating him about his moral and social duties. Krishna’s role as a teacher in the *Bhagavad Gita* is ascertained only through Arjuna’s asking him to be so and lasts only for the moments of dilemma. Here, we see that the divine incarnation is in a way the “projection of the eternal into the sphere of the conditioned existence for the moral betterment of mankind”(Radhakrishnan, 12). The composer of the *Gita*
deliberately creates this educational setting synthesizing philosophy and reasoning for the edification of common man through the divine. Whether the credibility of Krishna as a speaker and teacher is accepted or not can be determined only as the songs unfold.

Arjuna rationalizes his misgivings about the battle as he says, “and I see evil omen O Keshava (Krishna), nor do I foresee any good by slaying my own people in the fight” (1:31). He further points out that he renounces all the pleasures of victory or kingdom, as they mean nothing for him if he loses his family members in the battle. He summarizes the atrocious sins that he will commit if he fights the battle by saying, “in the ruin of a family its ancient laws are destroyed; and when the laws perish, the whole family yields to lawlessness.” (1:40). This exigency created by Arjuna’s refusal to fight results in the dialogue of the Gita. Immersed in a mood of sentimental self-pity, Arjuna recoils from this task, which requires him to hurt his own people. Krishna rebukes him for this self-indulgence and counters with a resounding rhetorical retort. He exclaims “Whence has come to thee this stain (this dejection) of spirit in this hour of crisis? It is unknown to men of noble mind (not cherished by the Aryans); it does not lead to heaven, on earth it causes disgrace O Arjuna” (2:2) In his attempt to release Arjuna from his doubts, Krishna appeals to his sense of honor and martial traditions. He begins the dialogue by imploring Arjuna to fight since refusing to act will lead to the violation of his duty and result in dishonor. Krishna’s teaching begins with the lesson on the distinction between the self and the body emphasizing that one should not grieve for something, which is already perishable. War is justified in this case as the social duty of the Kshatriya, as his swadharma or law of action requiring him to engage in battle. Krishna argues that human existence is brief and death is certain. In order to maintain dignity for
this short period of life, it is imperative to accept pain and suffering, for the sake of right action. The narrative schema of the poem then assumes that this argument is not adequate to convince Arjuna to fight. Krishna anticipates Arjuna’s refute to his own argument and follows that inevitability of death, however, cannot justify murders, suicides or wars. He preemptively argues that the death of fellow human beings cannot be desired, simply because all men are bound to die. Krishna therefore proceeds to explain the philosophy of Samkhya and the duality between Purusa (self) and Prakriti (not - self) and how this is unified and subordinated to the Brahman or the ‘absolute’. The self as explained in this form of philosophy, is the “permanent entity behind all the changes of conscious life”. It is neither derived from nor dependent on or determined by the world; it is unique and integral. Prakriti on the other hand is conceived as the ‘un manifested’ and as such “all mental and material phenomena are explained as the outcome of the evolution of Prakriti”. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan comments in his translation of the Gita that, “when the self realizes that it is free from all contact with Prakriti, it is released. The Gita accepts this account with the fundamental modification that the dualities of Samkhya – Purusa and Prakriti –are the very nature of the Supreme principle, God”(55). Consequently, though Krishna emphasizes in the previous verses on Arjuna’s sensibility to shame and urges him to pay attention to worldly considerations, he later declares that the fight needs to be undertaken in a spirit of equal mindedness. “Treat alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle. Thus thou shall not incur sin (2:38)” The essential philosophy thus being that without yielding to the restless desire for change, without being at the mercy of emotional ups and downs, human beings should perform the task assigned to them in the situation in which they are placed. Along with this
Krishna also makes it amply clear to Arjuna that in the process of reincarnation of the soul, none of the people destroyed in the battle are really killed,

He who thinks this (soul) is a slayer, and he who thinks this (soul) is slain, are both ignorant. This soul neither slays nor is slain. It is never born, nor does it die, nor having once been will it cease to be. It is unborn, eternal and everlasting. This primeval one is not slain when the body is slain (2:19)

Through a somewhat deductive reasoning the audience here is instructed about the benefits of renouncing the emotional motives guiding all actions. Since the fruits of actions do not depend on human beings it would be unwise to be emotional about such acts. By revealing the doctrine of the indestructibility of the self and pointing out how action is to be undertaken in concurrence with one’s responsibilities in the material world Krishna actually presents two sets of arguments to Arjuna. If for some reason Arjuna fails to be convinced by one he should have the opportunity of pondering over the other, urging him to keep looking for valid reasons for wither undertaking or renouncing his duty at a crucial moment. In other words, Krishna implies that no action is as simple as it seems and that one might have a variety of arguments available to oneself before making a decisive choice.

Arjuna’s argument attains its peak in chapter eleven of the Gita followed by a denouement of the argumentative pattern and shifting into a question and answering phase. His skepticism still renders him undecided as to whether he should follow the path of pure knowledge or action to resolve his dilemma. Arjuna questions, “if thou deemest that the path of understanding is more excellent than the path of action, O Janardana (Krishna) why then dost thou urge me to do this savage deed, O Kesava (11:30)”.

Krishna’s response not only emphasizes the indispensability of action in human life but
also further exposes the invincibility of the result of such action by reiterating, “time am I, world – destroying, grown mature engaged here in subduing the world. Even without thee (thy action) all the warriors standing arrayed in the opposing armies shall cease to be” (11:32). Although Krishna by this point in the text has made several attempts to reveal the extent of his knowledge, Arjuna remains unconvinced. He notices contradictions in Krishna’s arguments and therefore hesitates to make his own judgment without any further evidence. This argumentative dissonance is also reflected in the structure of the poem and might be a technique to impel the audience to construct their own meaning out of the text. Scott Stroud in his article on the implications of multivalent narrative structure of the Gita illustrates that “too many of Krishna’s phrases and assertions come into conflict” and the narrative utilizes the contradiction and conflict to open up rhetorical possibilities within the audience (9). Stroud’s opinion is that, the author(s) of the Bhgavad Gita purposely left the message ambiguous to instigate free thinking and message construction by the audience – little was to be taken literally from this work. For instance, the audience could concede some elements (if not all) of the determined world (due to the gunas), and still believe that Arjuna like the audience, has the freedom at least to choose to become enlightened (through emphasizing one guna in particular). Individual efficacy and physical determinism can potentially be reconciled with charitable audience reconstruction. In general, the metaphors and description of ultimate reality taking the form of Krishna could be adaptable to audience expectations; one could mold this to a variety of religious bents ranging from mystic theism to atomic pluralism (9).

This line of argument is significant to understand the pragmatic or material implications of the text. On one hand it seems that the religious figurehead here takes up responsibilities for both creation and destruction. Arjuna is only an instrument to implement the fate of the people assembled in the battlefield since through destiny the results of his actions are already decided and preordained,
Time am I, the world destroyer, matured, come forth to subdue the worlds here. Even without thee, all the warriors arrayed in the opposing armies shall cease to be. By me they have already been slain. Be thou the mere instrument, O Savyasacin [Arjuna] (11:32).

Again, on the other hand Krishna shifts his justification to fight on the rewards awaiting Arjuna at the end of the battle, “if thou art slain, thou wilt obtain heaven, or if thou conquer thou wilt enjoy the earth. Therefore arise, O son of Kunti, resolved to fight” (2:37). As we have seen so far, Krishna uses a variety of argumentative subjects to implore Arjuna to resume fighting the battle he faces. He appeals to Arjuna’s sense of honor, his desire for rewards in both heaven and earth, the protection that his family needs from him and finally the personal salvation he shall gain at then end of his life for doing his duty – performing dharma – at the time of need. Albeit each argument here is presented with reference to the specific situation in the Gita, they are explained in terms of a more general and philosophical view of life and the material conditions that surround it. The entire situation thus can be interpreted as an example bearing witness to why and what should be done in similar contexts. As I had recounted earlier, while the persuasive techniques are directed to Arjuna in the text, the connotations of the argument are presented to a general audience through the filtering narrative of Sanjay. This is most interestingly exemplified when at the crux of Arjuna’s despondency he demands that Krishna reveal to him the divine form that he had been alluding to so far. Arjuna’s recurring dilemma is consummated in this moment when he pleads that,

The birth and passing away of things have been heard by me in detail from Thee, O Lotus-eyed Krishna, as also thy imperishable majesty. As Thou hast declared Thyself to be, O Supreme Lord, even so it is. (But) I desire to see Thy divine form, O Supreme Person (11: 2-3).
So Krishna finally reveals that which he had been preaching and most outstandingly, at
this point the narrative makes a sudden shift to see this divine form first through the eyes
of Sanjay who through most of the intermediate chapters remained inconspicuous. Hence,
through the words of Sanjay, the sole silent spectator of the conversation, the divine form
is made visible and available to its general audience. Re-introducing Sanjay into the main
event of the text can be recognized as a way of inviting external interpretations of the
narrative regime. Although Arjuna’s arguments are mostly resolved, whether it would
also settle the dilemma of a general audience or not still remains a concern for the author
of the text. So one is compelled the subsidiary dialogic between Sanjay and Dhritarashtra
which even if it does not expose metaphysical realities curiously connects the text to a
material and existential audience.

It is this audience that Krishna indirectly appeals to while he urges Arjuna to
perform his duty. And it is also this audience that Stroud refers to when he comments that
“an interesting extension to narrative theory can be made in that this narrative uses
ambiguity and multiple levels of meaning to facilitate audience openness and possible
acceptance to diverse value structures” (10). As mentioned earlier in this section, Krishna
substantiates his argument by providing insight into the social consequences of Arjuna’s
action, revealing at the same time the metaphysical truth behind all action in life. It is
interesting to note how in this intricate argumentative structure of the Gita, this deductive
– inductive reasoning aims at the establishment of multiple interpretive assumptions on
the basis of already ascertained valid knowledge. This knowledge is explained in the
Mahabharata as the knowledge of eternity and time, of immortality and death, and how
these two need to be juxtaposed not necessarily as conflicting interests but also at times

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converging. Krishna preaches to Arjuna that "To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction" (2:47). The principle of disinterestedness in the result of an action would help Arjuna to overcome his dilemma and will ultimately lead to the knowledge of the self. Dispelling Arjuna’s doubts through explaining the selfish motivations underlying his predicament, Krishna actually wants Arjuns to focus on transcending the empirical concerns of wealth and power. Teaching the discipline of yoga shastra, Krishna proclaims, helps one in yoking together and harnessing disparate energies within human conditions and advance the passage from the narrow ego to the transcendent personality. The *Gita* gives a comprehensive lesson on yoga shastra, which includes various phases of the soul’s development and ascent into the ultimate form. There are three main kinds of yoga namely, jnana yoga or the way of knowledge, bhakti yoga or the way of devotion and karma yoga or the way of action. These are distinguished on account of the distribution of emphasis on the theoretical, emotional and practical aspects of human actions. In other words, it proclaims that cognition, will and feeling, though logically distinguishable, is not really separable in the concrete life and unity of mind. Rather they are different aspects of a singular movement of life.

The teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita* can be ascribed to the genre of “progressive teaching technique” applied throughout the Indian philosophical-religious tradition. Eliot Deutsch explains this as the technique used at the early stages of a student’s educational training. The purpose of this technique is to bring about a desired cognitive end,

The progressive teaching technique is a step by step leading of the self to higher levels of insight and understanding. This is found psychologically on the belief that at any given time one is capable of grasping and assimilating only those ideas
or argument that are commensurate with one’s achieved level of understanding” (Deutsch 21).

This process of steady progression to cognition enhances analytical formulations that all students should accomplish. So if all the facts are presented to the student at the same time, in most circumstances the student will fail to analyze them. By gradually introducing various aspects of an argument the teacher also provides considerable space for the student to question and counterargue and thereby come to his/her own conclusion rather than being driven to it. In the Gita too, the teacher Krishna slowly guides his pupil Arjuna to attain the status, which he has, mama sadharmyam. Arjuna represents the archetypal intellectually struggling student who is indecisive and waits to receive the guidance towards a relevant assessment of the crisis he faces. His mind is clouded with the forces of darkness, falsehood, limitation and mortality, which prevent him from reaching any decision and as he continues to resist these forces his skepticism becomes more apparent and acute. In this state of utter bewilderment he takes refuge in the friend who is also the charioteer of his vehicle and symbolically therefore will guide him through the perils of the battle. Arjuna however had the choice of determining his teacher for enlightenment, typified as Krishna who also happened to reveal himself as the jagadguru- the world teacher in the context of the argument. Every human being thus becomes a pupil, aspiring for perfection, seeking knowledge of the world. And if he seeks this knowledge with devotion and faith, then rather than constituting totally as an external influence on society religion becomes not the goal but the guide. As a result, we see that in the Gita, while sometimes Arjuna instantaneously complies with Krishna’s teachings, in other circumstances he probes into the subject not to be agnostic but for further
elucidation. In the *Gita* we see that the contrived ethical dilemma is finally resolved with Krishna’s arguments that convinced Arjuna on his rightful duties. Pedagogical techniques were regulated for learning through interaction and reasoning and as such the wisdom and insight of the teacher played a crucial role. Interpretations of Krishna’s onto-theological reasoning persuade not only Arjuna but also the general audience/readers of the text. This could easily be applied as an educating strategy where the audience were gradually enlightened and successfully convinced in the end by the teacher. In the *Gita* as we have seen, while the rider in the chariot is Arjuna, the charioteer is Krishna and he has to guide the journey. Metaphorically this journey also implies being re-born. In other words, even though human beings are born into their temporal life, they must be born again to the life of spirit. They need not wait for this second birth until the hour of physical death. In the *Gita*, Krishna – the opponent as well as the teacher – is therefore deliberately identified as a transcendental influence that is immanent in all. He is the manifested power behind religion; he is often referred to as Paramatman, which implies transcendence or jiva-bhuta the essential life of all. Though Krishna had been Arjuna’s friend throughout the epic in this moment of peril he decides to be the teacher and constructs this persona by revealing a cosmic vision to his friend and challenger for credibility. Demonstrating his capacity to be an accomplished general Krishna appears equipped with knowledge and potency to generate trust and loyalty among his listeners. The tendency in Krishna that assimilates knowledge and faith to aid his audience in a particular crisis could also be emblematic of his trajectory from an intellectual contender to a successful rhetorician. Krishna, the spiritual teacher of Arjuna, in the course of his conversation in the *Gita* presents Arjuna with a vision of the universe. Further, Krishna,
proclaims himself as being born again and again to show the path of dharma or righteousness whenever a poignant moment as that of Arjuna’s dilemma arises. Krishna’s anthropomorphic existence, manifested and reiterated in the course of the epic, and its various entrapments demonstrate attempts to erase the dichotomy between the divine and the mortal, the religious and the secular.

The omniscient narrator in the Gita reconciles two order or planes of knowledge. This reconciliation functions as a synchronizing principle within the ethical and metaphysical scheme of the poem. The knowledge in this case is an interest not so much in improving the actual conditions as in making the best of this imperfect world, in developing the qualities of cheerfulness and contentment, patience and endurance. B.K Matilal indicates in his book Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics that the “moral dilemmas” depicted in Indian epics deal with situations where two opposing moral viewpoints seem to be correct. Instead of discursive monographs on morals, the narrative then often fulfills a social and exploratory function. In this case, inaction and action within the matters of the empirical world are both shunned and instead a middle way is offered to the audience in which actions are done with the perfect state of mind in an imperfect world. God therefore is not presented as a moral principle but as an intellectual idea, a consciousness that resides deep down in the human mind and from whom subsequent knowledge and rules derive. A distinction is made here between true knowledge and logical knowledge. Logical knowledge is achieved through reasoning, whereas true knowledge is jnana or spiritual wisdom. This wisdom should not be confused with theoretical learning or traditional beliefs since ignorance here does not mean intellectual error. According to the Advaita Vedanta, this wisdom is always present.
and need to be revealed rather than acquired. Hence by examining the position and power of the two participants in the Gita as well as the dexterity with which the text guides its audience, we can say that part of the rhetorical effectiveness of the Gita can be attributed to a successful integration of two different modes of rhetorical education. The first of these concerns a discursive arc from probable philosophical knowledge to absolute foundational truths while the second revolves around the exposition of material complexities of a given situation. Within the meta-theological and socio-cultural structure of the Gita, which is evidently ethics oriented, speculating and analyzing human behavior and action, we catch a glimpse of the speaker’s gnostic insight into questions regarding the validity of transcendental knowledge. Krishna’s speeches were ceremonial only to the extent that it points out the distinction between actions that are honorable and those that are not which have also been discussed in other Vedic texts. His oratorical skills were undoubtedly born of natural talent or were simply situational since we find no evidence throughout the epic of any training on speech delivery undergone by Krishna or any other character.

In the Hindu way of life therefore, spiritual teaching fostered discursive activities that encouraged public argumentation. The status of the teacher was ennobling, as accentuated in the figure of Krishna who was requested to assume this position at a time of crisis and aided in harmonizing empirical and transcendental knowledge. Krishna’s triumph lies not in his character but in his teachings. The author of the Gita explains that Krishna of history and his discussions with his friend and disciple Arjuna is one of the millions of forms through which one could develop awareness and experience. The incarnation of god is only a demonstration of the latent divinity of human beings, “it
is not so much the contraction of divine majesty into the limits of human frame as the exaltation of human nature to the level of Godhead by its union with the Divine” (Radhakrishnan 32). A thoroughgoing analysis of this enlightened individual and his discourse thus illuminates a succinct system of ethics which is as much intellectual as material, locating the core of human motives on attaining an inner discipline which would finally lead to the liberation of the soul. This ascension and education of man demonstrates the role of religion in Indian culture and its influence on the shaping of its socio-religious discourse.

The fate of Krishna and Arjuna now

If we could consider the discourse of the Gita, as a model for the political argumentative tradition of India, then we should prepare ourselves for an encounter with its many renditions since then. The philosophical teachings of ancient India were combined with religious ethical discussions on human actions, and were veritably applied to situations dealing with personal, social and national concerns. In this rhetorical model, we find no serious dispute between the position and knowledge of the rhetor and its effect upon the audience. Here, argumentation was not claimed as an art to be practiced for its own sake but rather an expressive mode of communication used mainly to exemplify and elucidate to the audience the diverse paths leading to a decision, which in the end was still left open to audience interpretation. In this dissertation I have tried to bring out the salient features of a certain segment of Indian political rhetoric or argumentative tradition. I have tried to explain the various complexities associated with even naming such a tradition, if we can at all take the liberty to call it so. The problems with such
liberties is that sometimes in spite of ourselves we construct binaries whether of private or public sphere or of religious and secular rhetoric. That these distinctions are not only arbitrary but also varies broadly from culture to culture has been the central issue of my arguments here. The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangha’s uses of the rhetorical tropes of myth and history to persuade both diasporic and native audiences exemplify the versatility of the functions of rhetoric. In this last section now, I would like to sketch some significant features of the trajectory of India’s argumentative tradition, especially in the twentieth century.

Broadly speaking, the instances of argumentative practices that I choose to discuss here are specifically political speeches delivered by nationalist leaders during India’s struggle for independence during the first half of the 20th century. My purposes in this section are, a) to trace the nature of these arguments and its relation to the argumentative practices of ancient India as I have discussed earlier in this chapter and b) account for the changes this would entail in our perception of rhetorical practices of India. A succinct summary of the relevance of the arguments between Krishna and Arjuna in contemporary situations can be found in Amartya Sen’s book *The Argumentative Indian*. Sen notes,

These arguments remain thoroughly relevant in the contemporary world. The case for doing what one sees as one’s duty must be strong, but how can we be indifferent to the consequences that may follow from our doing what we take to be our just duty? As we reflect on the manifest problems of our global world (from terrorism, wars and violence to epidemics, insecurity and grueling poverty), or on India’s special concerns (such as economic development, nuclear confrontation or regional peace), it is important to take on board Arjuna’s consequential analysis, in addition to considering Krishna’s arguments for doing one’s duty. The univocal message of the *Gita* requires supplementation by the broader argumentative wisdom of the *Mahabharata*, of which the *Gita* is only one small part (6).
It is not my purpose here to examine the relationship between the theological and philosophical teachings of the *Gita* and its narrow and severely orthodox interpretations that has been championed by Hindutva politics. Rather, I would like to expose here the ways in which various nationalist leaders have appropriated the political rhetoric of the *Gita*, before and after decolonization in India.

Before Swami Vivekananda – the most prominent religio-nationalist leader of India during late 19th/early twentieth century – traveled to Chicago to attend the Parliament of Religions seminar in 1893, he wrote, “we must travel, we must go to foreign parts. We must see how the engine of society works in other countries, and keep free and open communication with what is going on in the minds of other nations, if we really want to be a nation again” (Vivekananda, Vol 5, pg 5). The concept of independent, sovereign nationhood occupied the minds of all nationalist leaders of India during the final phase of India’s struggle for freedom. As Vivekananda sought answer to the question of how people who coexist in the same geographical region might constitute as a nation, he also realized that the essence of Indian nationhood lies in finding a way to encourage free and open communication between the nations. He identified this openness as the cause for Europe’s power and India’s decline. By referring to this mode of communication, Vivekananda fundamentally urges the nation to participate in dialogic conversations with leaders and people of other countries. So he declared that India “as a nation, has lost its individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back to the nation its lost individuality and raise the masses” (Vol. 6, pg 225). At a time of national crisis debating about one’s democratic rights while drawing on examples
and experiences of other nations seems to him the most plausible way of gaining freedom from colonial rule.

Vivekananda as one could say, does what Krishna did for Arjuna in crisis, he teaches the nation to educate itself and then perform one’s duty. Vivekananda’s idea of national identity has been often associated with a form of religious nationalism not uncommonly observed during this period of anti-colonial struggle. Another renowned leader of the time like M.K.Gandhi also spoke of reinstituting Ram Rajya – the kingdom of Ram as a nationalist ideal. This form of nationalism, though it had obvious religious connotations is distinctly separable from the political ideals of Hindu fundamentalism. While the former conceptualized religion as a non-partisan political force that would unify the diversity of the country and enhance the process of self-realization, the latter’s basic motivation included an imposition of pre-colonial (that denotes a time before all former invasions) Hindu idyllic state that is not only improbable but also an expression of sectarian politics.

The fervor of religiosity continues to gather momentum in India during times of national crises. Now, whether the crisis is real or imaginary is difficult to define. In some ways crisis could be defined as “the turning point or a moment when a decisive change is imminent, especially in times of difficulty or instability”(Hesford and Kozol, 3) Many would agree with nationalist leaders like Vivekananda, who see the crises of colonization as an impending doom, something that leads to the degeneration of the country’s ‘soul’. This crisis of the nation is quite similar to the crisis of the battlefield of Kurukshetra, though neither Vivekananda nor any other leader of that time so to say could consolidate all the aspects of Krishna’s character. However, operating within this
critical moment, both the leaders take recourse to rational and emotional arguments simultaneously, to move the audience towards a decision to take action. It is this need to make a decision that characterizes political rhetoric, where the question of consensus is as significant as the process by which one can arrive at a consensus. It is true that, political rhetoric in democratic politics is intimately related to competition, conflict and struggle as much as to the establishment of common grounds within which common purposes and values may emerge and develop. Communication in democratic politics therefore, is constantly being informed by power, interest and advantages of groups participating in the political affairs. In spite of competitions and struggles, action ensues only when these conflicts are transformed into agreements by means of persuasion. Political rhetoric thus also becomes a moral enterprise undertaken to persuade and audience to act in a certain way. This decision to consensual action also indicates a close relationship between the speaker and the audience. Just as the speaker cannot persuade without considerable knowledge about the people he is addressing, the audience can only respond if they know of the position of the speaker and that of his opponents.

All of this brings us back to the question of the relationship between religion, reasoned debates and politics. In its own way, Vivekananda’s method of solving India’s problems through its revival of Indian national identity brings together two modes of nationalism, one rooted in political ideals and the other in indigenous religious trends. A rupture between the political and religious domains of nationalism has been noted by subaltern historiographer Partha Chatterjee in his book *The Nation and its Fragments*. In response to Benedict Anderson’s enumeration of factors that made imagining of the nation possible first in European nations and later elsewhere, Chatterjee forwards an
argument that rejects the Euro-American models of nationalism claiming that it results in an epistemic violence, a form of colonization that moves beyond territories to colonize the imagination forever. The history of nationalism Chatterjee points out in the colonized state better known as “anticolonial nationalism” creates its own domain of “sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains-the material and the spiritual”(6). Europe and its accomplishments were, according to Chatterjee, acknowledged and replicated in the outer domain while the purified sanctity of the inner domain was maintained by its close affiliation with the “spiritual” the essential mark of Indian cultural identity.

This essential spiritualization has however been critiqued by some subaltern historiographers and post-orientalist Indologists alike for homogenization and mythical interpretation of Hinduism. Richard King argues “that the notion of Hinduism is itself a Western inspired abstraction which until the nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian religious belief and practice”(98). The term Hinduism thus came into provenance first among Western scholars of India in the eighteenth century when they tried to locate the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts “by an implicit tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religions based upon contemporary Western understandings of the Judaeo-Christian traditions” (101). This Western literary bias fundamentally contributed to a textualization of Indian religion. This however, does not mean that Indian culture was devoid of its own religious-literary tradition, but that by focusing on a single religious text predisposed Orientalists in establishing such texts as the essential foundation for
understanding Hindu people as a whole. This also lead to a disavowal of oral and popular aspect of the Indian religious tradition as mere superstitious practices that bore little or no resemblance to these foundational texts. In their way of delivering judgment on the essence of Hindu religious philosophies, the Orientalists inadvertently gave birth to Hindu elite tradition that continues to plague Hindutva political movements. But like we can see in the speeches of Vivekananda, the distinctions between inner and outer domains are not irreducible as they illuminate fascinating cultural and rhetorical sites where the boundaries often merge. Consequently, the development of a singular national identity in these moments of crises can only mirror the tension between microcosmic private religious spaces and the larger public conventions of heterodoxy. It is this hybrid existence of simultaneously distinctive yet interdependent trends of multiple argumentative traditions that would adequately describe the rhetorical practices of India.

The urgency of establishing or achieving adult masculine status by the young men of India was a recurrent theme in the political speeches of the time. Subhas Chandra Bose, a distinguished leader of this period says in one of his speeches delivered as the President of the Indian National Congress that “One of the most hopeful signs of the time is the awakening among the youth of the country…The youth of this age have become self-conscious; they have been inspired by an ideal and are anxious to fulfill their destiny” (Bose, 87). According to Ashish Nandy, this masculinity had interesting psychological implications. In his opinion the colonial ideology in British India was built on the cultural meanings of two fundamental categories of institutional discrimination in Britain, sex and age. He states “colonialism, too was congruent with the existing western social stereotypes and the philosophy of life which they represented. It produced a
cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic domination symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity”(4) and therefore the call for a revival of indigenous masculinity since “femininity-in-masculinity was now perceived as the final negation of a man’s political identity, a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself”(8). The process of emasculation through colonization, hence lead to many nineteenth century Indian political, social and religious reform movements trying to make Kshatriyahood (the warrior caste and that which Krishna implores as Arjuna’s duty as a Kshatriya) being the exclusive indicator of authentic Indianness. Finally, the Kshatriya inspired assumption lead to some of the immensely courageous but ineffective forms of terrorism and anticolonial movements in some parts of the country. But it remains as an exciting instance of invocation of dharma that is expected to eventually lead to right judgment in moments of crises. In a short section of the second chapter of the Gita Krishna appeals to Arjuna’s sense of Kshatriya duty where he makes several aspects of this duty clear. A Kshatriya should in no way falter to do his duty in war since “there exists no greater good for a Kshatriya than a battle enjoined by duty” and they should be happy “for whom such a war comes of its own accord as an open door to heaven”(2:31). Within the Kshatriya community who do not take pride in domestic pleasures, failing to do one’s duty would result in incurring sin. Such a sinful career will be further penalized when other Kshatriya’s “will recount thy ill-fame and for one who has been honoured, ill-fame is worse than death”(2:34). Moreover, Krishna says, “the great warriors will think that thou hast abstained from battle through fear and they by whom thou wast highly esteemed will make light of thee. Many unseemly words will be uttered by Thy enemies, slandering thy strength. Could anything be sadder than that?”
(2:35-36). A rise in the trend of hyper-masculine characteristics that some could argue is a consequence of Krishna’s appeal to Arjuna warrior-like conduct, is also reiterated in various instances of Hindutva politics. Bajrang Dal – a tributary organization of the RSS group mostly active in India comprises of young men who describe themselves as “warriors of the Hindutva revolution” a modern reminiscence of the valiant Kshatriyas. The HSS too incorporates this special Hindutva Kshatriya ideal mostly evident in their composition of songs invoking martial sentiments among men to combat the crises of dharma or duty.

It is the spacious and absorptive idea of Indian religiosity that has strewn numerous obstacles in constructing a unilinear narrative of either religious rhetorical tradition or a secular argumentative tradition of India. In the article “Postcolonial Intervention in the Rhetorical Canon” Raka Shome points out that Rhetoric as a discipline has been traditionally built on public address. But historically public address has been a realm where imperial voices were primarily heard and imperial policies were articulated. The colonized did not always have access to a public realm, or if they did, their speeches were not always recorded in mainstream documents, since the means of production rested with the imperial subjects. All this perhaps means that we have built a lot of our understanding of rhetoric, and the canon of rhetoric by focusing on (and often celebrating) imperial voices (Lucaites et al 596).

Only occasionally do we hear voices like Raka Shome’s in this discipline, which proclaims the legitimacy of this alternative approach, urging us not only to analyze our discourses but also “to connect them to larger political practices of our nations” (595). It is disappointing to see that the tendencies that inclined Oliver to fail to understand the cultural complexities three decades ago are unmistakable in the way the non-western rhetorical traditions are viewed by the discipline even today. With only a handful of
scholarly publications -in the area of post-colonial/ non-western rhetorical traditions-

Rhetorical Studies have very little to offer in this area, in spite of the fact that the uses of language and literature in postcolonial countries have been profoundly influenced by Western ideas and philosophy due to colonization. It would be difficult to find an independent course offered in these departments based solely on non-western rhetorical traditions. A plausible explanation could be made for less ‘interested’ students as well as insufficient scholarship. The question remains when post-colonial studies have had a much fuller life in the hands of other disciplines within the humanities, why is it being underrepresented in Rhetorical Studies. Another remarkable difference can be noted in the paucity of international (in this case postcolonial) student/scholars in this discipline evincing how rhetoric and composition has failed to travel overseas, to generate interests among scholars abroad to study and be studied and to develop a discipline that encompasses without sacrificing.

Disproportionate emphasis on rationality and reason, while disapproving emotion and passion, produces an incomplete rigid model of political rhetoric that fails to do justice to the diversity of human social, political and cultural experiences. The privileging of reason reduces politics to rational conversation only, with no room left for deliberations, including conflicts and oppositions, as integral to the process of making democratic decisions. It would be to our advantage to offer a position to political rhetoric where the interplay between emotion, perception, passion, morals and reason are deemed as noteworthy factors in arriving at consensus within a democratic setting.
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