

BRITISH COLONIALISM AND THE SHAPING OF MODERN HINDUISM SOME IDEAS AND CONCEPTS

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Introduction

On 6 December 1992, an organized Hindu mob, lead by politicians from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), swarmed over and demolished the Babri Mosque, Ayodhya, which, they claimed, the 16th century Mughal emperor Babur had built, as an act of contempt, on the site of the God Rama's birthplace. But as the Indian historian Pankaj Mishra has demonstrated, this claim was based on a series of fabrications and misconceptions, or as Mishra himself states, "a travesty of history". (1) In fact, Rama's presence in Ayodhya is a comparatively recent phenomenon. For much of its history Ayodhya was an influential centre for Shaivite thought and worship, and many of the temples and sects devoted to Rama were founded under the patronage of Shi'a Muslims who began to rule Awadh (the state containing Ayodhya) in the early 18th century(2). Indeed the cult of Rama worship is a rather late development in North India and was largely unknown prior to the 10th century(3). In 1949, two years after Indian independence, a Hindu civil servant surreptitiously placed idols of Rama inside the mosque. Accounts were generated that Rama himself had installed these idols, and in 1984 the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) a Hindu revivalist organization, and part of the loose Hindu nationalist group known as Hindutva (or "essence of Hinduism") announced its intention to build a grand temple to Rama on the site of the mosque(4). The destruction of the mosque was the logical (or illogical) culmination of these plans.

What I wish to explore is how the impulses which led to Ayodhya have been shaped and sustained, and the context in which the nationalist currents which motivate such actions justify themselves. In this paper I am going to suggest that Hindutva had its origins in British colonialism and an imagined Hindu identity, which later developed its own ideological paradigms and momentum.

I would commence this paper with a few comments. Firstly, I am not going to discuss the evolution of Islam under colonialism, as relevant as this may seem. Secondly, I must emphasize that this is a rather basic overview of a complex and subtle topic about which whole books have been written. Finally, as a historian and a Hindu, I must stress my own distance from the philosophies of Hindutva. I agree with Amartya Sen when he states: 'It is difficult to understand fully why a movement that began with pride in Hindu values, in which the proof of Truth plays such a big part, should produce activists who would try to have their way not only through falsity but through carefully crafted fraud'.(5) Moreover I have a strong personal investment in Gandhian philosophies, especially the principle of *Ahimsa* or non-violence. I have always been stirred by Orwell's description of Gandhi as a man who could shake the might of the British Empire by sheer spiritual power (6), and I would like to think that truth, justice, compassion and inclusion, are more cogent and enduring than violence, mendacity and the psychological defeatism of exclusivity.

British colonialism and rule in India

The earliest British East Indian Company (EIC) rulers were essentially conservatives who recognized the underlying strength and resilience of Indian institutions, and therefore had little inclination to tinker with the fundamental mechanics of Indian society(7). They considered themselves heirs to the great and powerful Mughal Empire, and modelled their government on the basic precepts of Mughal rule. These included a policy of non-interference in matters relating to traditional religions, social life, and other cultural values(8).

The historian Anthony Reid, has demonstrated that throughout the 18th century there was a marked change in European attitudes towards the non-Western world(9). The earlier fascination which had produced deep interest in and profound admiration for an imagined “East”, as well as an array of breathtaking scholarship, was replaced by a conviction that oriental polities were both stagnant and of tyrannical (the so-called ‘oriental despotism’). They were incapable of governing for their own peoples, thus underscoring the need for their replacement by more enlightened (i.e. European) administration. This viewpoint was to be deployed to justify British rule in India(10).

In the early decades of the 19th century there was major re-orientation of British policy towards its subject populations. This reflected the undisputed ascendancy of the British in world affairs, which instilled a sense of mission among the British ruling classes(11). According to this perspective, Britain’s ordained role was nothing less than that of mankind’s civilizer, and to thus both catalyst and principle director of the moral and physical regeneration of all humanity. And this role embraced a special responsibility toward the rescue of putatively backward societies, especially those supposedly groaning under the dual weight of oriental despotism and a parasitic and avaricious priestly caste(12).

The subsequent policy of reform was an amalgam of three dominant ideologies, each seen as the hallmark of a peculiarly British genius and thus representing the most elevating moral and spiritual gifts Britain could bequeath to its subject populations. These ideologies were firstly free trade, which was portrayed as the dynamic upholding British pre-eminence and global power (13); secondly, evangelical Protestantism, seen as the principal factor underlying and sustaining the elevated character of the British ruling classes (and unleashed upon India after the 1813 reform of the Indian Acts, which, among other things, gave missionaries the freedom to proselytise in India)(14); and thirdly the philosophical utilitarianism of, among others, John Mill, his son J.S. Mill, Bentham and Macaulay, which was widely hailed as containing the most advanced theories and ideals of statecraft, social reform and education(15).

James Mill’s book “History of India”, published in 1817, was extremely influential in shaping British attitudes towards India(16). Mill wrote this work without paying a single visit to India, and without the slightest knowledge of any Indian language(17). He dismissed Indians *en bloc* as childlike, superstitious, perfidious and backward. This work had a profound impact on Lord Macaulay who dismissed Indian culture as made up of ‘medical doctrines that would disgrace an English farrier – Astronomy, which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school – History, abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long – and

Geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter.’ (18) In promoting his famous 1835 Minute of Education in India, Macaulay further contended, ‘...I have never found... (one Oriental scholar)... who would deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia... we must at present do our best to form a class who may be presenters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions in morals and intellect.’ (19)

The reform program comprised nothing less than ‘...an ideological offensive against the foundations of Indian life’. (20) British reformers sought the transformation, indeed the annihilation of the entire corpus of Indian thought, and the destruction of indigenous social, political and religious institutions (21). This ‘civilizing’ project was to become the imperial mission; a great enterprise in which British rulers would view themselves not so much as conquerors, but rather emancipators (22).

In the years leading to the Indian Mutiny, British confidence and complacency, together with an obvious disdain for those whom they governed, blinded the rulers to an emerging and dangerous cleavage between the colonial administration and those administered. Indian resentment was strained to breaking point by a series of reforms which struck at fundamental Indian political, cultural and social structures (23).

The Indian Mutiny and its Aftermath

The Indian Mutiny thus came as profound shock to all levels of British society both in India and in metropolitan Britain. The mutineers had not just rejected the British as rulers, they had in imperial terms, launched a direct assault upon the British worldview. At its deepest level, the Mutiny challenged the very precepts which had informed the entire 19th century colonial project. Within Britain, the Mutiny provoked public fury, and was interpreted as base ingratitude (24). The mutineers’ vehement rejection of a ‘benevolent’ British rule which had aimed at the progressive reconstitution of Indian society so that Indians might shrug off the detritus of their own flawed past and attain the mantle of British civilization, indicated to the British, at least, that the Indians were incapable of imbibing their great and ennobling gifts that the British had offered them, and that efforts to uplift them were both misplaced and designed to fail (25).

The immediate aftermath of the Mutiny marked not only the termination of the power of the East India Company, and substitution of direct British rule, but also a number of major shifts in policy which in effect abandoned the ambitious program of Anglicist reform in India (26). But the most far-reaching ideological impact of the Mutiny and that to which I now wish to turn was the development of complex theories about the nature of Indian society. These theories would be used to simultaneously enable the British to ‘know’ India (in British terms), but more importantly to explain the irretrievable inferiority of Indians and their biological incapacity to absorb the fruits of British civilization (27).

These new ideologies of rule were grounded in racial theories which were widely accepted throughout the late 19th century, and were used to justify supposed British superiority. Of course, well before the Indian Mutiny, British racial commentators had developed hypotheses which were meant to demonstrate the biological ascendancy of

the so-called ‘white races’.(28) However the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origins of Species of Natural Selection* in 1859, and its wide ranging discussions of the role of evolution, appeared to provide these theories with solid, scientific evidence(29). For the first time, science seemed to encase the concept of race in terms of biological inevitability. Race, it seemed, was all encompassing, ‘...the prime determinant of all important traits of body and soul, character and personality of human beings and nations.’(30) Social Darwinism, as the theory became known(31), implied the linear development of man, an evolutionary advance from primitive and degraded to civilized and cultivated, a maturation propelled by progress (defined in strictly European terms) as the dynamic agent of human history, and the survival of the fittest, pushed to the limit, as the dominant principle of human organization(32). Since a people’s racial characteristics predetermined its culture and capabilities, it was possible to systematically assess and rank each society within the framework of an exhaustive human taxonomy. Social Darwinism could thus be invoked not only to explain the ‘naturalness’ of European and specifically British ascendancy, but also to categorize the many backwardnesses of ‘inferior’ races, and in particular their inability to comprehend, let alone grasp, the benefits wrought by a ‘higher’ civilization(33).

Census operations which began in India in 1872, allowed for the accumulation of vast quantities of data which enumerated the population according to a variety of social criteria(34). The full cumbersome apparatus of Victorian Social Darwinism transformed this material into a complete Indian bio-racial taxonomy which ordered India both vertically and horizontally into a series of overlapping classificatory systems revolving around caste, religions and notions of primary race. These systems enabled the British to exactly locate the cultural and racial status of any individual within the overall structure of what was perceived to be the timeless, unchanging Indian social hierarchy(35). This taxonomy emphasized the ‘otherness’ of India; a society whose peoples could only be ‘known’ according to categories that permitted the reinforcement and maintenance of colonial authority, and which underscored the intrinsic social and racial distance of Indian society from that of metropolitan Britain(36).

Caste

The foremost and most basic categorization was that of caste. Prior to the Mutiny, British observers had tended to view cast as a mere by-product of occupation, but in the post-Mutiny Raj, and according to Social Darwinist discourse, caste was to be seen as the basic building block of India’s unyielding social pyramid, and thus integral to any understanding of Indian ‘difference’(37). The British interpretation of the hierarchy of caste, was based on classificatory systems described in classical Hindu texts, and which were now transformed into contemporary reality(38). The colonial authorities ascribed to each caste a series of unalterable and intractable sub-racial socio-biological cultural characteristics (for example, ‘criminal’, ‘martial’, ‘degenerate’) which firmly situated the status of both the caste and cast members within the total structure of Indian society(39).

The immediate impact of the British caste taxonomy was to freeze Indian social structures, and to arrest the general fluidity which had hitherto prevailed within Indian society(40). As David Washbrook states, the British perspectives “...missed the finely

honed status differentials within caste which gave the system flexibility, and above all, missed the webs of interdependency which linked numbers of castes together in an economic and social structure.”(41)

A further consequence was the institutionalisation and expansion of Brahman power. The colonial authorities accepted without reservation the classical description of the *varna* system which firmly installed the Brahmans at the apex and as custodians of caste hierarchies. The Brahmans had always furnished the majority of literate functionaries in most Indian polities, and it seemed obvious for the British to employ them as civil servants(42). However, the power now at their disposal greatly exceeded that they had exercised in the pre-colonial era(43).

British social evolutionary theories insisted upon inter-caste conflict as an activating precept of Indian society. The colonial authorities were so insistent on this that where evidence of such rivalry was not immediately obvious, they felt constrained to assume or even invent it. Thus the declaration by senior members of the Secretariat of the Madras Presidency that they would look favourably on appeals directed against caste ‘aggression’ produced a new dimension in local politics. As David Washbrook comments, ‘Once the language of large scale communal hostility, of broadly defined castes competing against each other had been introduced, there was no end to the number of situations it could be used to describe.’(44)

Religion

The second, most simplistic and yet most enduring categorization was that of religion. The 1872 Census established an India which consisted of a Hindu “majority” and a sizeable Muslim “minority”(45). This formed the basis for the British contention that India was divided into two great and implacably antagonistic religious communities, namely those of Hinduism and Islam(46). According to this viewpoint, every Indian, by virtue of his or her religious identity, inescapably belonged to a specific religious community, and was thus destined to gaze with ingrained distrust and hostility at the other. Moreover, religious identity imbued its members with a number of particular inscribed characteristics which reflected the stage of evolutionary development each had reached. Thus, ‘...Muslims were violent, despotic, masculine; Hindus were indolent, passive effeminate. One fought by the sword; the other by cunning and litigation.’(47) This division of Indian society into two clearly demarcated and mutually hostile communities – Hindu versus Muslim – not only ignored the immense cultural pluralism within India(48), and the huge swathe of liminal religious forms which drew inspiration from both Hindu and Muslim impulses(49), but also overlooked the fact that Indians had never primarily typecast each other according to religious adherence(50). Romila Tharpar asserts that the ‘perception which groups subscribing to Hindu and Islamic symbols had of each other was not in terms of a monolithic religion, but more in terms of distinct and separate castes and sects along a social continuum’.(51)

The British also misunderstood the essential nature of all religious traditions, especially those they described as Hindu. British administrators and scholars reduced the vast, disparate and often conflicting mosaic of cultures, deities, sects, ideas and philosophies into a single religion clustered under the unitary rubric of Hinduism(52). Hinduism, as defined by the British, found its original, highest and most authentic

expression in Brahmanism, and in a select body of sacred texts. Brahmanism thus not only represented the finest efflorescence of Hinduism, but also its 'core' tradition, and the most scholarly manifestation of Hindu culture. This interpretation of Hinduism overlooked the fact that Brahmanism was not itself a unitary tradition, and apart from internal divisions of sub-caste and occupation, there were many localized variations of Brahmanism which had arisen in response to specific social, cultural and historical contingencies(53). Moreover, the British interpretation of Hinduism failed to recognize the dynamic nature of Indian religion, in particular the constant dialogue between various religious forms, and the constant re-working of both Brahmanical and popular traditions to provide greater meaning for devotees at all levels of society(54). In locating an 'essential' Hinduism within a narrow textual framework, and relying upon Brahmanic advice on all matters pertaining to Hindu culture, law and belief(55), the British authorities effectively discounted the validity and significance of popular manifestations of Hinduism (which were often customary, and which expressed their cosmologies through ritual rather than texts), and which claimed the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of Hindus(56). Finally, all British descriptions of Hinduism invariably foregrounded its unbridgeable distance from Semitic (and specifically Christian) models of religion; in other words those models that supposedly characterised the highest levels of civilized humanity(57).

Race

British evolutionary theories further divided the Indians by race. There were two primary groupings, Turanians and Dravidians, essentially generic terms for North and South Indians. These two 'races' were subdivided into a meticulously compiled hierarchy of sub-racial groupings, which incorporated considerations of caste, religion, colour and even district of origin(58).

The Turanians consisted of the waves of Aryans who were believed to have colonized India in the centuries BCE, and who has bestowed upon the subcontinent the multiple benefits of a higher civilization, including the Hindu religion(59). However, despite their noble origins, the Turanians had irrevocably "degenerated", the result of long association and careless intermarriage with the indigenous Dravidians or non-Aryans. Indeed, racial decay among the Turanians had proceeded to the point where renewal or regeneration was dismissed as an impossibility(60).

The position of the Dravidians was even more irredeemably hopeless. British racial theories assigned great weight to the colour of a people's skin in determining their standing in the evolutionary scale. Socio-biological status decreased in proportion to increasing darkness of complexion(61). The supposed 'Negroid' features and complexions of the Dravidians marked them out as members of the most backward racial grouping, and this belonging to a decidedly lower strata than the Indo-Aryan Turanians. Thus the 1891 Census Report of the Government of India could speak of the Dravidians in the following terms, 'This was a race black in skin, low in stature, and with matted locks, in war treacherous and cunning; in choice of food disgusting, and in ceremonial, absolutely deficient. The superior civilisation of the foreigner (the Aryan) soon asserted itself, and the lower race had to give way...The newcomers had to deal with opponents far inferior to themselves in civilisation, and with only a very rudimentary political organization, so the opposition to be overcome before the Aryan could take possession of the soil was of the feeblest.'(62)

But the Dravidians were not just racially degenerate. British evolutionary theory also charged them with the long term contamination and debasement of their superior and morally upright religion of the Aryans. The original religion of the Aryans could be uncovered by careful and discriminating study of the ancient Brahmanic texts, which were written in Sanskrit, and which had been validated by a whole century of European scholarship as ‘pristine’ and ‘authentic’ Hinduism (63). By contrast, the religion of the Dravidians, the ‘aboriginal’ peoples of India, with its perceived lack of scriptural and philosophical underpinnings, was dismissed as no more than barbarism, and a collocation of ‘material demonologies’.(64) Over time, it was opined, the advanced, refined and textual traditions of the Aryans had meshed with the ‘wholly degrading’ religion of the Dravidians to the detriment of the former. Thus in 1901, Charles Johnstone, a high-ranking Methodist missionary, could write of the Tamils: ‘To this black race, passionate, magnetic of wild imaginings, we must trace every lurid and demoniac element in the beliefs of India. This is their contribution to the common sum: a combination fitting in the hue of the African voodoo, the Australian cannibal, and the Papuan headhunter.’(65)

The impact of corrosive colonial ideologies in undermining the intellectual self-confidence and self-respect of Indians has been widely recognized(66). Indeed, many of the key constructs of Empire, so assiduously inculcated by the British, were ultimately accepted by influential sections of the Indian population. Thomas Metcalf has demonstrated how the portrayal of an India deeply sundered between two competing religious communities took root in India(67). But other critiques of Indian society also gained wide currency, especially among Indian intellectuals. These included perspectives on caste; on the Turanian/Dravidian racial divide; on Brahmanism and Sanskritic texts as the sole repository of authentic Hindu culture (with its corollary, the denial of the validity of regional or popular Indian religious forms; on the measurement of Hinduism against perceived and often idealized benchmarks set by Semitic religions (especially Christianity, and more latterly against those established by an imagined modernistic ‘Western’ scientific ethos)(68).

Hindu Reform Movements

Hindu reform movements, reacting to British ideologies and the incessant propaganda of missionaries began the task of reconstructing an idealised Hinduism which was largely the fabrication of British orientalist scholarship. This so-called ‘neo-Hindu’ movement, which found particular favour among Brahman communities, sought to rescue Indian by retrieving and re-creating an imagined ‘pure’ Hinduism which had supposedly existed in the Golden Age of Sanskrit Aryan civilization(69). This project would necessarily require the suppression of the ‘dark, feminine and materialistic religion of the Aboriginal Dravidians’(70) wherever such forms appeared. Among missionaries and their supporters festivals involving rites of asceticism or ecstatic trance or possession states were held to constitute ‘devil worship’ and ‘demonolatry’ and were thus obvious deviations from the higher Aryan culture of Brahmanic textual Hinduism. Such crazed and unrestrained manifestations were considered ripe for reform or suppression(71).

Geoffrey Oddie has demonstrated how in late 19th century India, Western educated elites, taking their cue from the diatribes of Christian missionaries, successfully

agitated for the enactment of legislation to ban the practice of hookswinging.(72) This ritual, which was common in Bengal, the Deccan, and the southern regions of India (73), involved various castes(74), trance states (75), and vows offered to female and therefore axiomatically 'lower' deities(76). Although there was evidence that hookswinging served to unite villages and that the ritual was intended to promote the general well-being of the communities within which it occurred(77), the reformers, using the terminology of British Social Darwinism, described it as 'uncivilized' (78), and the festival as belonging to 'the mob' and the 'lower orders'(79). In presenting their case against hookswinging, these elites employed the essential arguments most calculated to win the support of missionaries and colonial officials, namely that the practice was not located in Brahmanic culture, and was thus unrelated to Aryan/Vedic traditions; that it was not justified by the *Sastras* or classical Hindu texts, and that it never involved the participation of Brahmins(80).

I offer the following as an example of the continuing power of colonialist discourses among a certain stamp of Hindu reformers, and their ill-informed condescension to popular forms of Hinduism. This relates to the ritual of *kavadi* worship in the major Hindu festival of Thaipusam in Malaysia. As with hookswinging, *kavadi* worship involves trance states and bodily mortification. In his address to the 1988 Asia-Pacific Hindu Conference in Singapore, Datuk Govindaraj, a former President of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam asserted that Thaipusam in Malaysia had 'become a horrible spectacle of wild display, competition and exhibition that finds no sanction in our *Saistra* (sic)'. He spoke dismissively of the 'ignorance' of devotees, and the 'terrifying techniques' of *kavadi* worship(81). He later issued a statement condemning *kavadi* worship, as 'an affront to the Hindu religion', a practice bereft of scriptural injunction, and contended that many who engaged in the ritual did simply to 'show-off'.(82)

Profoundly influenced by the intense Puritanism of Victorian sexual morality, the Westernised elites also turned their attention to other targets. These included a campaign to destroy erotic statuary within Hindu temples(83), to suppress the sensual poetry of *bhakti* or devotional Hinduism(84), and to falsify the meaning of, and subsequently ban the well-established South Indian Hindu culture built around *devadasis* (or temple dancers). In the latter case, as Friedhelm Hardy comments, 'They succeeded too well in their task; the abolition by law of the *devadasis* was regarded as a necessary reform of South Indian temple culture, but it also resulted in a total destruction of one of the major segments of that culture, through which for one and a half millennia deep rooted Southern religious sentiments had expressed themselves. The whole range of art that had surrounded the temple was eliminated, and whole issue of temple eroticism was prejudiced.'(85)

In South India reformism was largely inspired by attempts to recover an imagined autochthonous Tamil culture which had supposedly existed prior to a putative Brahman invasion which had oppressed the Tamils, overthrown their institutions, and adulterated all aspects of Tamil society with unwanted Aryan-Sanskritic accretions. The 'Dravidian' project has been directed at highlighting and promoting the separatist religious, linguistic and social traditions of South Indian civilization (86).

North Indian reform movements often assumed a far more militant character. In 1875, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a northern Brahman, created a new religion which he

called *Arya Samaj* (87). Stung by the barbed criticisms of Christian missionaries, Swami Dayananda claimed that the original and pristine religion of the Hindus was wholly textual, and was based solely upon the Vedas, the oldest Indo-Aryan scripture(88). His definition of Hinduism, circumscribed by Vedic tradition as the only source of revelation, thus denied the validity of other forms of religious expression such as image worship, *puranic* traditions, as well as folk deities. Typically, Swami Dayananda preached in Sanskrit which made his message accessible only to high caste Hindus(89). However, the ideology of the *Arya Samaj* had a profound impact. To quote Dominique-Sila Khan, ‘This arbitrary re-invention and reconstruction of the Vedic religion which was later taken for granted and believed to be the real historical tradition by those who did not have access to the Sanskrit texts, was to have a deep impact of modern Hindu fundamentalist ideology.’(90)

Swami Dayananda found rivals among the co-called ‘orthodox’ communities, in other words those who adhered to the Brahmanical *varnashastra dharma* caste system. Using a series of religious assemblies, these groups created the *Sanatan Dharm* movement which advocated a different form of ‘unified’ Hinduism characterised by the cult of the great Brahmanical gods (91).

In 1915 the Sanatanis and Aryas sought to minimize their differences and combined to form the Hindu Mahasabha. Dr Moonje, one of the leaders of the Mahasabha, attributed the perceived weakness of the Hindus to the proliferation of religious ideas, sects and castes, in contradistinction to the alleged monolithic Muslim community(92). The final formulation of Hindu nationalism, which sought to conflate Indian and Hindu identity, was advanced in the 1923 book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, written by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a Mahashastrian Brahman. His conception of Hinduism was rooted fully in an imagined golden Vedic age, which he wished to see restored in India(93). Savarkar denied ‘Indian-ness’ to Muslims and Christians, whom he suspected of owing primary loyalty to their respective Holy lands rather than to their native country(94). He wrote: ‘Although Christianity and Judaism have had their roots in the Indian soil for about 2,000 years, Islam for 1200 years, and Zoroastrianism for 1000 years, these traditions remain forever “foreign” and their followers are excluded from the rest of the community.’(95)

In 1925, Dr Hegawar, one of the leaders of the Mahasabha, founded the Rashtriya Swamyamsavak Sangh (RSS) or Association of National Volunteers, which projected itself as a defender of a gravely imperilled Hinduism(96). The RSS, forerunner of today’s BJP, emphasized martial values and opposed the supposed ‘effeminacy’ of Mahatma Gandhi’s ideal of *Ahimsa* or non-violence; indeed it was a member of the RSS who was responsible for Gandhi’s assassination(97). The sort of society envisaged by the RSS was highlighted by the comments of Guru Gowalkar, Director of the RSS from 1940 to 1973, who stated that the Nazis had manifested ‘race pride at its highest’ by purging Germany of the Jews. Gowalkar spoke of India as Hindustan, and argued that the Hindus, despite their ethnic and regional differences, comprised a distinct ‘race’(98). The RSS taught a new version of South Asian history which contended that the era preceding the arrival of Islam consisted of a Golden Age, the supposed *Rama Rajya* (or Rama’s rule) which was shattered by Muslim invaders who thus could be held wholly accountable for the multitude of evils, divisions and weaknesses of contemporary Hindu society(99). The dissemination of these views

was aided by subsidiary populist publication labels which presented reductive portrayals of Indian history and Hindu mythology that eschewed analysis or accuracy, and which manipulated Hindu and other traditions to suppress unwelcome ‘distortions’ (for example, the habit of meat eating during the Vedic period). These publications also privileged certain texts, namely the Vedas, the classical texts, the Shastras, the Law of Manu, and the Epics, as comprising the entire authorized body of Hindu knowledge and tradition(100). Ironically these were the very texts which had been identified by British Orientalists as forming the core or essence of Hinduism(101).

The RSS also inspired the formation of group dedicated to rewriting Indian history to free it from Muslim and Christian ‘distortions’ and to reflect Hindutva perspectives. After the BJP’s accession to power in 1998, a body was set up to engage with the Orwellian task of preparing an approved corpus of school texts, which would deny the role of minority traditions and beliefs in the construction of modern India(102). (For example, while preparing this paper, a colleague kindly emailed me a document which, disregarding all recorded historical evidence, purported to show that that the Taj Mahal was actually an ancient Saivite temple, the implication being that one of the most ornate and exquisite buildings in the world was the product of Hindu rather than Islamic genius.) After 11 September 2001, the BJP and its allied organizations portrayed themselves to the West as reliable allies in the fight against Muslim fundamentalism(103).

Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to show how during the course of colonialism, British narratives attempted to define India and Indians in terms of the dominant ideologies of the British Empire. Thus the grand reform project of the East India Company was abandoned after the Mutiny for depictions of India in terms of Social Darwinism, which reduced India to a nation of categories based on caste, competing religions communities and racial identities, and which located an ‘essential’ Hinduism within a circumscribed and imagined Vedic and Brahmanic tradition. I have also argued that having internalised these perspectives, Hindu nationalists reproduced British Orientalist scholarship as the basis of their own reformist agenda, and as the source of their own ideology. In the process of inscribing these ideals, Hindutva has developed its own exclusivist paradigms, impulses and momentum, thus creating a system of intellectual, moral, philosophical and religious autarchy, which both conflates the concept of ‘Indian-ness’ Hinduism, and denies the contributions, and indeed, the very legitimacy of those designated ‘the other’.

But having provided the spur for the development of Hindu reform movements, Western ideologies continue to play a role in sustaining and reinforcing Hindutva. Perhaps their contribution is subservient to the fear of the perceived Muslim ‘other’, now given concrete form in the modern state of Pakistan, but it is nonetheless real. Writing of colonial missionaries, Gauri Visvanathan states that they ‘...were attracted to the idea of an intellectual revolution that would lead toward a universal Christianity, the belief that Hinduism would surely fall from its foundation and the Gospel rise on its ruins – that through science and modern learning “ we must all come to one religion” – was quite clearly the ideology that directed missionary labor

in India.’(104) Reading the websites and publications of US based evangelical websites, and the determination of other bodies to remake India in terms of Western imperatives and priorities (in which Indian feelings, susceptibilities or objections are merely incidental), sometimes leads to the conclusion that the West has learned nothing at all from its long, brutal and often tragic history of interference and intervention in other parts of the world. While the impact of Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ thesis on the Muslim world has been well documented (105), the reaction of India and the Hindu world to the Western globalization project is as yet largely uncharted. However, it may well be that these discourses are ultimately returned to the West in forms that are currently unpredictable and perhaps unimaginable.

Notes

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81. Govindaraj, Dato S. "Country Report:Malaysia", *First Asia-Pacific Hindu Conference*, Singapore, 3 April 1988.
82. *Hinduism Today*, April 1988, Volume 10, Number3:8. Kavadi worship is widely practiced within the great Murugan shrines in South India and among the locations of the Tamil diaspora, and has extensive puranic and textual justification. Having interviewed some hundreds of kavadi worshippers, my overwhelming impression has been of their humility and sincerity. Datuk Govindaraj's strictures were received angrily by many Malaysian Hindus who regarded them as high-handed, unconscionable, and for a high official of an institution supposedly steeped in the traditions of Hindu culture, almost unbelievably nescient. (Belle, Carl Vadivella, *Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Hindu Festival Misunderstood?*, Doctorate Thesis, Deakin University, 2004:393).
83. Danielou, Alain. "Introduction", in *The Complete Kama Sutra*, Park Street Press, Vermont, 1994:10
84. Ramaswamy, op cit:120
85. Hardy, Friedhelm. "Ideology and the Cultural Contexts of the Srivaisnava Temple", in Stein, Burton, *South Indian Temples: An Analytical Reconsideration*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1978:138
86. See Ramaswamy, Sumathi, op cit. The attempts to distance Tamil/Dravidians from the imagined civilization of 'Aryan-Brahmanical-Sanskritic Hinduism' sometimes takes quite extreme forms. For example, I have been shown scholarship, based on dubious linguistics, which purports to show that the Tamils were of Sumerian origin, and hence their civilizational achievements predate and are quite distinct from the history of the remainder of India. How their experiences over the

several millennia they have spent in India might have shaped their (supposed) post-Sumerian history and acculturation has not been discussed in any great depth, but is usually rationalised in terms of alleged Aryan ‘oppression’.

87. Stein (1998), op cit:276

88. Klostermaier, Klaus. *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994:435-436

89. Khan, op cit:79

90. ibid

91. ibid:82

92. ibid:96

93. ibid

94. ibid:97

95. ibid: 108. A corollary of this doctrine is the contention that one who is not born Indian-Hindu cannot ‘convert’ to Hinduism, and that non-Indians cannot be or ever become Hindus. If applied rigorously this maxim would exclude such anomalous groups as Balinese Hindus, and would cast people of mixed birth into a profound religious and racial quandary.

96. Mishra, op cit:119

97. ibid:121

98. ibid:112

99. ibid:110-111, Khan, op cit:98

100. Mishra, op cit:112

101. Mishra, op cit:121

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103. Mishra, op cit:120

104. Visvanathan, op cit:62

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