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# Sectarian History: The Construction of Meaning in India

Jeremy Higgins  
jeremy.hggns@gmail.com

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# Sectarian History: The Construction of Meaning in India

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the construction of religion and social identity in India. Religion is an incredibly complex social phenomenon and must be examined holistically for a true appreciation of history. This paper follows the idea of authority and legitimacy, why religions are adopted, who designs administrations around them and how those administrations are informed. This ties into an examination of history, how it is written and what purpose that writing serves from a social perspective. This paper also examines how meaning systems coexist and affect each other, and how they in fact evolve together in a reciprocal process of development, and how identities are formed across people, in terms of defining one's normative characteristics as well as the otherness of outsiders. By trying to envision the perspective of a group by unpacking the meaning system that underpins the group's understanding, it may be possible to discern the nature of some conflicts. This may also allow for a deeper understanding of why some groups seemingly adopt definitions of themselves that are not conducive to their own history, but rather a functional byproduct of a neighboring group's understanding. Finally, social divisions are examined from the perspective of observable religious syncretism in India, what factors brought it about, what sustained it, and why it disappears in some cases but not all.

Honors project mentor: Eddie Boucher, Adjunct Professor, History

Any group studying an unfamiliar culture faces the problem of analogic reasoning and an associated risk of fallacies that are difficult to escape. For a country like India, which has endured foreign occupation for centuries at the hands of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, followed by the British, these fallacies have had the potential to be transmitted to the indigenous population, as generations have grown into an environment where their lineage and history has been continually appropriated. The notion of a Hindu identity, and who “invented” it, must be unpacked in order to clearly discern legitimacy when it comes to ownership of the history of a people. The purpose of this paper is to analyze some of the scholarship surrounding this issue, as well as some of the social theory that influences the construction of religious meaning.

### **Ascendancy**

The fabrication of metanarratives, both on the part of outside observers and from within a culture itself, depends on the usage of socially constructed meaning systems. Regardless of being culturally innate or politically designed, metanarratives are a form of social trust. Like religions, they are sustained by a substantial population believing in them, and because of this, they can be difficult to impress upon a people who subscribe to a conflicting narrative, and equally difficult to dispel once they have been adopted. Short of deciding what qualities should be assigned to it, the very notion of a pre-colonial Hindu “nation” is itself laden with social constructions secured to a Western umbilical, containing a range of meaning that is inherently culture bound.

This debate over Hindu communalism or an early sense of a Hindu nation, with different arguments demonstrated in historical evidence, implies that there are conflicting and therefore “false” interpretations of what it means to be Hindu, both now and in the past. It also implies that

there is a singular, normative form for this identity, with one linear program for understanding its history, which all legitimate Hindus should subscribe to. It is a sort of fantastic way to appreciate a large body of humanity, with all of its complexities and richness, and is tantamount to Orientalist thought, which these absolutist criteria are derived from. In this vein, ownership over the Hindu identity translates to an ownership of the past, which according to Gyanendra Pandey is constructed, and that “the modern history of India...was first written in colonial times and by colonialists (23).”

Hegemony over the heritage of a people comes from the perceived acceptance of those people to participate in that heritage, to adopt the identity that has been constructed for them. Once secure in the immutable annals of tradition, a “self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system” emerges and becomes the catalogued norm of the power structure (Said 70). These norms then act to inform the social structure, which is inevitably a primary consideration for the design of an administration, which in recognizing the needs and differences of its citizenry, lends further legitimacy to the “invented” groups. In this way, we can see the arguments for the legacy of modern communalism as an array of understanding that reflects a historical *British* understanding of the social constituency of colonial India (Stoler Miller 784). This understanding is a realization of Peter Berger’s famous work on what he describes as the “fundamental dialectic process of society”, where identity creation, and society at large, is a constant process of externalization, objectification, and internalization (4). In view of Berger’s work, Hindus are an evolutionary product of themselves, whereby projecting themselves into the world, they experience themselves in the form of human product, and reassign new meaning within themselves to formulate a sense of cohesion in the world they live. The role of the British

is coincidental; there will always be antagonisms, social and otherwise, that people respond to as part of Berger's externalization process.

The irony here is that in aligning against an alien body, be it the British or Islam, Hindu sentiments were likely galvanized among Indians, presenting themselves perhaps as "more Hindu" than they really might have been. Berger's process needed no further encouragement, as the British recognition of an expressed Hindu identity serves as its objectification; in this sense the British were merely observers of forms they encountered as being presented to them in earnest. The common lack of acknowledgement of the role Indian scholars and informants has historically played in shaping the Western understanding of India is what Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi has referred to as "orientalism's genesis amnesia (Lorenzen 639)." With a new metanarrative in place that determined the identity of the Hindu people, it was only a matter of time before it came to be re-appropriated and internalized by Indians as new definitions were codified into social awareness.

But these groups *are* more than mere constructs of the British, the result of a Western approximation of observable trends. To admit that these communities are often congruent with religious traditions is only to say that the British understood people at the time in terms of their faith, which was probably the most apparent and ready-made social division, but also perhaps had come to the forefront of social importance for communities that had been responding to and developing alongside Muslim rule for hundreds of years.

Benedict Anderson has observed that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact...are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined (6)." With this thought in mind,

the question of when Hindus became Hindus presents itself as the moment when they were observable to others as a distinct body of people. The distinction is important, because regardless of being observed by Muslims or British colonials, *a comparison was made*; one between the observers and the people who would come to be known as Hindus.

To think of a social group as homogenous is to think of it as self-aware, in concert and in agreement with itself. Here we see the proposition of a pre-colonial Hindu nation as precarious, as early Indic, which is to say “pre-Hindu”, history is marked by a clear divide between Brahmanism and Sramanism, with documented animosity existing between them (Thapar 211). However, it seems likely that these divisions were reconciled in order to collectively face the superior alien “otherness” of monotheism as Islam was introduced into India.

### **Juxtaposed Meaning Systems**

To allow that a comparison was made between cultures invites questions about how these comparisons were constructed. Modern anthropology employs processes such as hermeneutic exposition in order to translate culture bound “emic” information into objective “etic” information within some kind of working theoretical framework. Of course the pitfall to this natural human predilection to try and view the unknown in terms of the known is that “this kind of transformation replaces one meaning system (the “inside” views of one’s informants) with another meaning system (the theoretical perspective of the investigator (Young et al. 118)).” Even the perception of empirical data is a construction, and it is just as subject to the bias and prejudices that warrant the need for objective thought. It is easy to see how this problem would be compounded by distance, which is to say difference, between people as an increasingly inappropriate set of analogues would be used in order to try and approximate the culture of the

other in terms that could be understood domestically. The fact that this approach depends on a common metric of etic data (such as Sanskrit among many Hindu sects) ensures some amount of cultural misunderstanding, as all parties surely would consider their own viewpoint as self-evident truth.

Thapar has argued that Hinduism, unlike Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, is not the evolution of a single catechism, which has since developed into various branches and sects, but “is rather [a] mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas and the adjusting, juxtaposing or distancing of these to existing ones (216).”<sup>1</sup> This could imply that the perception of likeness among normative Hindu practices might have proven beneficial or practical to local communities in some way, perhaps galvanizing sentiments among existing neighbor communities rather than the spreading of doctrine through proselytizing or evangelism.

Trying to imagine a Hindu pantheon from within the context of monotheism immediately presents problems. It seems unlikely that Allah would not be a key component, if not the base of the perspective informing the Muslim etic construct. However, depending on what Hindu sect was encountered, Brahmanic tradition could be either present or absent in the observable emic information. This construction of respective cultural metanarratives makes comparison seemingly impossible. With Muslim sectarian divisions as a perfect example, certain theological disputes within the Muslim world, such as the Sunni/Shi’ite disunion based in the question of legitimacy of the caliphate, may not be reconcilable. However, there is no disagreement in Islam, even along sectarian lines, that the word of Allah as delivered through the Qu’ran and the

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<sup>1</sup> There are many who would reject the idea that Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have evolved from single catechisms, but Thapar’s point that these have a clearer source material than Hinduism seems sound.

teachings of the prophet Muhammad are the ultimate authority; both sides assert that the other has merely interpreted this authority incorrectly.<sup>2</sup>

However, a Hindu identity cannot be traced back to a singular authority or textual record but “instead, a mass of oral and written literature composed in more than twenty languages (Stoler Miller 786).” Lorenzen has observed that an appreciation of this variety and diversity is a suitable perspective for outsiders, due to the “empirical fact that the beliefs, practices and human organization of Hinduism are less standardized and centralized than...those of Roman Catholicism or Sunni Islam (643).”

While commenting about the boundaries that are inevitably erected by a culture’s ethical standard, Max Weber wrote that “the absolute impurity of those outside one’s own religion, as taught by the Shiite sect of Islam, has created in its adherents crucial impediments of intercourse with others...(41). Weber goes on to discuss Hindu caste taboo in a like fashion, which brings to light the terrific irony that these very devices of social arrangement are what could potentially serve as a common bond between cultures, while effectively ensuring both parties are unable to truly experience each other. The cultural emphasis on tenants rather than observable tendencies is part of the “etic construct” of both sides, and therefore the similarities pertaining to taboo, exclusion, stratification, and socio-religious status will be stifled by one side’s status as infidels and the other as untouchable. However, a clue to the ensuing syncretism of the era may be hidden in these day-to-day cultural similarities that hide in the shadow of the pronouncements of the respective dogmas.

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<sup>2</sup> Sufi Islam challenges this idea, as it has been historically notorious for challenging central Muslim authority with regard to Muhammad and the Qu’ran. It brings up an important question: How many tenants or traditions can one forego before being defined as something else entirely? And who decides that definition?

If we take Anderson's comments about imagined communities at face value, the discussion becomes less about an accurate historical account, but instead an argument about whose perspective should be adopted as canon. Sheldon Pollock has observed that "the symbolic meaning system of a political culture is constructed, and perhaps knowing the process... is a way to control it (264)." This phenomenon is not a recent development, as it certainly holds true for Diya al-din Barani and accounts of his *Ta'rikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, which, in an effort to rightly guide Muslim rulers of the Delhi Sultanate, was driven more by "Barani's conception of truth (which was) religious and ethical, not historical (Hardy 317)." In a similar fashion, the *Ramayana* was used to animate public support and inform the "political imagination" of India between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Pollock 282-286). A power structure will always find a narrative like the *Ramayana* attractive because it allows alignment with modes of authority that are so ingrained in the mind of the public that they go unquestioned. However, this necessitates a pre-existing identity that must have been robust enough to accommodate translation into a new design, and therefore cannot be seen as an exclusive construction of a ruling body- power in the present depended on the precedent set by the history of previous administrations.

However, to say that identity construction that is informed by this kind of agenda is not "real" again begs the question of who holds the authority to deem religious identities as either genuine or false. A sense of meaning, once established in a society, has real impacts and consequences: from which temples are built, to which gods are lost to antiquity as new forms emerge, to the level of violence between communities.<sup>3</sup> John Rogers has pointed out that even identities formed from within the "essentialist frameworks" of British colonial rule are no less

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<sup>3</sup> Demonstrated by events like the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, which was followed by months of rioting and the deaths of approx. 2,000 people. Regardless of historical accuracy or theological correctness, it could be argued that sentiments are made real by their consequences.

authentic than the more fluid identities of the pre-colonial era (20). To say that modern Hindu nationalists are misguided in looking to the past to justify their position does not diminish their very real impact on the world- in this way, “false” identities have the potential to have a greater influence on the world than the “real” ones.

### **Syncretic Otherness**

Cynthia Talbot has asserted that “identity formation in praxis always involves...the articulation of group boundaries that exclude others and the development of internal criteria for solidarity (699).” This appreciation of identity formation as a dual process accounts for the fact that no group develops in a vacuum, and no group of any size can exist without affecting its neighbors, resulting in a sort of cycle of reciprocal reactions.

It follows that an evolution of the understanding of divisions would also entail, with initial conflicts based on cleavages that would in retrospect seem like minor differences, as increasingly foreign nations and peoples were encountered further from an original locality of likeness. Lorenzen comments extensively on the nature of “otherness”, stating that identity can only be recognized by contrast, and so “without the Muslim (or some other non-Hindu), Hindus can only be Vaishnavas, Saivas, Smartas or the like. The presence of the Other is a necessary prerequisite for an active recognition of what the different Hindu sects and schools hold in common (648).” In short, the cleavages that existed between these groups were at least severe enough for different groups to emerge as separate entities in the first place, but once Islam was encountered, these differences paled in comparison to what they collectively encountered in the form of monotheism. This again seems to damage the prospect of an early Indic Hinduism that existed as we appreciate it today, although it appears that core Brahmanic likenesses were

prevalent enough for foreign nations to assume they were in fact the same people. It is worth mentioning that Indians did not understand the introduction of Islam into India as a single influx of Muslims, but rather a collection of new people identifiable by geographical, ethnic, or cultural understandings (Thapar 223). This may actually allude to an early Indic common understanding of self, which did not place religion as the hallmark characteristic of a people, and did not feature a religious union that joined people across vast spaces in the way that, for instance, trade routes might have.

It leaves the question of why a clearly diverse group would eventually identify themselves as outsiders had defined them. Derived from the word *Sindhu*, the native name for the river Indus, the Persian adoption “Hind” or “Hindu” was originally used to describe the people living east of the Indus River (Lorenzen 635). Initially, this label merely drew attention to the fact that those it referred to were not Muslims. Once again Berger’s dialectic process helps illustrate how this identity may have taken shape. The word “Hindu” used by the Persians was an externalization because they were defining the world, or in this case, the people in it, in terms of themselves: *they are not Muslims, they are just Hindus- the people over the river*. The sentiment was codified and transmitted among Muslims, who objectified their own externalization, in fact bringing it with them into India to inform the new administrations of the sultanate and realize this new public in terms the caliphate could understand. Once so affected by this process, an Indic culture that was historically known for being accommodating was taken aback by a foreign people that did not assimilate the way others had. Faced with the potential threat of a massive oppositional unity, which revealed the common bonds between them through the opposition’s otherness, the Indians adopted the term for themselves, internalized it, and imbued it with new meaning: *we are not Muslims, but we are not just the people over the river, we are a vast, rich*

*people; we are Hindus.* There may not have been an occasion for Hindus to consider themselves on such a scale before the introduction of Islam into India. It may be that “totalizing conceptualizations of society...became possible only by juxtaposition with alternate life-worlds; they became necessary only at the moment when the total form of the society was for the first time believed...to be threatened (Pollock 286).” This transference, or rather adoption, of the Muslims’ emic framework into the Hindu imagination seems to have helped foster a syncretic meaning system that was shared by both sides, as an arguably new incarnation of Islam emerged alongside a sense of Hindu identities which were becoming more lucid and a tandem development ensued.

However the initial process took shape, to say that the defining of Hindus by Muslims was some kind of foundation for an enduring communal schism in India is to ignore a historical wealth of syncretic functionalism and tolerance. Talbot reminds us that throughout South India, the politically dominant “Muslim polities of the peninsula were dependent on Hindu officials and warriors for tax collection and maintenance of order in the countryside (706).” Tolerance made political sense, but so many aspects of day-to-day social structure were rooted in caste or economic class rather than religion, provincial trading of religious symbols and mythology came to be commonplace; in some cases seemingly as a mere byproduct of contact. Such exchanges were exemplified by folk literature in Tamil-Nadu, where guardians in the Draupadi cult are actually Muslim figures, and the blending of Puranic and Qur’anic personalities in the *mangal-kabyas* in Bengali (Thapar 225). *Pindari* war bands, boasting both Hindu and Muslim soldiers “appear to have developed a syncretic popular religion in which goddess Kali featured alongside Muslim saints as the objects of veneration (Bayly 184).” Bayly seems so convinced of the social forces driving the shape of religious practices as to assert that the decline of this type of mobile

“warrior culture” contributed to more distinct rifts between Hindu and Muslim practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (184). Bayly helps illustrate that once a common enemy was removed, familiar divisions were once again erected along the lines of religious differences.

Perhaps the most enduring example of syncretic understanding is in India’s most famous Mughal ruler, Akbar the Great. Akbar’s legacy is broad but might best be marked by his concept of “divine religion”, in which he effectively set the legitimacy of all faiths within his kingdom on an even tier to one another. Interestingly, Akbar’s attitude may have been influenced by poets of the era, including Guru Nanak who “repeatedly insist on the one religious message that God and spiritual reality are the same no matter what names we give them, nor what ideas we have about them (Lorenzen 652).” It begs the question of whether or not Akbar’s motives were purely political. Regardless, the lasting impact of Akbar’s sentiments can still be seen today in India in countless ways, but perhaps none more appropriate than the adornments of his own tomb, which alongside Arabic calligraphy are local and Hindu symbols, including the lotus flower and the swastika.<sup>4</sup>

The emergent picture is one of a developing narrative dominated by contradictions and anomalies, centered around two cultures pushed together, with one holding no meaningful understanding of the concept of conversion, and the other having no intention to convert. It is also a picture that shows that absolutism did not function in the world quite in the way as it was outlined by religious imperatives. Religious tolerance made political sense, encouraged economic growth through a wider acceptance of trade partners, and created a buffer of

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<sup>4</sup> Observed in Agra during a tour of Northern India Jan. 2013. Also observed during this same trip was the Tomb of Shaikh Salim Chisti, built by Akbar within the walls of Fatehpur Sikri to honor the Sufi saint- true veneration or political device?

legitimacy between a broad and diverse population and a single, often foreign, administration that clearly benefitted by being able to keep people neatly classified.

## **Conclusion**

If the modernist perspective that “the roots of ethnic and cultural nationalism...are seen as indigenous response[s] to the impact of colonial rule” is true, it seems logical that the ongoing conversation is an extension of this phenomenon, manifested as attempts to debase nationalist claims about the past (Rogers 10).

The West tends to view colonialism as an era we are now removed from in the modern world, something that happened in the past that we may now comment on. But the fact is that colonialism is an ongoing process, existing in the modern reading of history books as much as in the antiquity recorded in them. If we are to have any kind of honest, empirical discussion about identities, Hindu or otherwise, we must first acknowledge the ongoing construction of what Pandey refers to as the “false totalities of ready-made religious communities (13).”

The authority to rightly define religious identities exists only in the minds of people willing to acknowledge it; a willingness that may be borne out of desperate situations, such as complex socio-political disputes camouflaged as religious conflict. Scholarship that means to trump claims about the present by reaching into the past is playing the same game of dominion as those vying to justify their right to control by asserting ownership over history. As Lorenzen put it: “Only a recognition of the fact that much of modern Hindu identity is rooted in the history of the rivalry between Hinduism and Islam will enable us to correctly gauge the strength of communalist forces and wage war against them (631).”

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