

# The Global Roots of Modern Indian Radical Nationalism

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## *The Global Roots of Modern Indian Radical Nationalism*

The review takes as its starting point the book by Marzia Casolari *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism, and Nazism* in order to look at the impact of global ideologies on the growth of interwar period Hindu radical nationalism (Hindutva), focussing on the transnational developments that influenced it. The tumultuous nature of Hindutva continues to have a stronghold in India even today, especially since the coming of a right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party government, which makes it even more important to study its origins.

Key words: Radical nationalism, India, Fascism, Nazism, Casolari

Parole chiave: Nazionalismo radicale, India, Fascismo, Nazismo, Casolari

Nationalism in Modern India grew in the wake of strong anti-colonial sentiment and a desire to be free from British rule. The Indian National Congress (INC), which had the strongest hold and the widest geographical footprint in the nation, propagated pan-Indian nationalism underpinned by strong Hindu-Muslim unity. A scholarly analysis of Indian nationalism hints towards the absence of a romanticized model of nationalism by the INC. Culturally speaking, nationalism in India was segmented into Hindu and Muslim nationalisms. The term *Hindutva* stands for Hindu radical nationalism and it derives from the famous 1923 ideological epigraph by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar called *Essentials of Hindutva*<sup>1</sup>. After a

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<sup>1</sup> *Essentials of Hindutva* was written by Savarkar during his period of imprisonment (1911-37), punishment for the alleged assassination of a British officer. He managed to get the book out of the prison and published it in 1923. It is an important text for Hindu nationalists and ascribes Hinduness to those who consider India as their fatherland and sacred land. The concept becomes problematic for non-Hindus as it ascribes Hinduness to Non-Hindus: V.

century, this text is still used to describe an ideology that caters to the radical Hindus.

This review takes as its starting point the book by Marzia Casolari (*In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism, and Nazism*)<sup>2</sup> in order to look at the impact of global ideologies on the growth of interwar period Hindu radical nationalism known as Hindutva, with a special focus on the transnational developments that influenced it. I will first look at the Italian and German ideological influences on Hindutva, then I will stress the role of certain individual actors in the conception of Hindutva. The tumultuous nature of Hindutva continues to have a stronghold in India even today, especially since the coming of a right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) government, which makes it even more important to study its origins<sup>3</sup>.

Casolari's book gives a detailed account of contacts between Italian Fascism and several prominent radical Hindu Nationalists. The choice of the title is peculiar, as it mainly focuses on Fascist Italy – instead of on Nazi Germany – and India. She discusses several letters between Italian Fascist intellectuals, such as Carlo Formichi and Giuseppe Tucci<sup>4</sup>, with Indian nationalists. She integrates primary sources such as archives from Bombay, Delhi, Kolkata<sup>5</sup>, and Rome with public speeches by people like Savarkar, and Indian and Italian publications<sup>6</sup>, in order to reconstruct the connections between Italian Fascism and Hindutva. The book pays special attention to the role of those Bengali and Maharashtrian intellectuals who regarded Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as role models in uniting the people who were thought to belong to a single ethnicity.

The book opens with the earliest example of a relationship between Italy and Indian intellectuals from the 1920s. The Bengali and Marathi intelligentsia kept themselves abreast of the political events in Europe. They

Visana, *Glory and Humiliation in the Making of V. D. Savarkar's Hindu Nationalism*, «The Historical Journal», 66 (2023), n. 1, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> M. Casolari, *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism, and Nazism*, Routledge, New York 2020.

<sup>3</sup> BJP propagates Hindutva and its leaders have claimed it to be their chief ideology. The links between Hindutva and BJP and its implications are explained further in this review.

<sup>4</sup> Formichi was a scholar of Indian history and a disciple of Tucci.

<sup>5</sup> Bengal and Maharashtra were two main centres of social reform movements in India and places from where most social reformers and intellectuals hailed. The Italian consulate in Calcutta and Calcutta University made the diffusion of Fascist ideas easier within the state. The Marathi intellectuals like Balakrishna Shivram Moonje actively worked to establish diplomatic contacts with the Fascists through their publications and personal meetings with them.

<sup>6</sup> For example, publications that included local magazines and journals like «Vishvabharati Quarterly», «Modern Review» and «Ananda Bazaar Patrika», which actively published translated Italian works.

translated and disseminated the published works and propaganda speeches by leaders like Mussolini and Hitler. This process was facilitated by visits Italian diplomats like Giuseppe Tucci had been paying to India<sup>7</sup>. These personal contacts facilitated cultural exchange through education, study grants, and language programs<sup>8</sup>. Scholarships were granted to Indian students to carry on research in Italy and translations of Italian literature, propaganda, and news were made available to the Indian public. A general atmosphere of curiosity towards Italian culture was also fostered by intellectuals like the mentioned Tucci. One of the Marathi newspapers, «Kesari», idealized 1924 Italian Fascism and Mussolini's political reforms as a reason for Italian progress<sup>9</sup>.

Another point of admiration were the Italian Fascist youth organizations, and the emphasis put on the interplay between religion, militarization, and traditional values. Maharashtrian political leader Balakrishna Shivram Moonje visited Italy in 1931 and met Mussolini. He pointed to the affinities between Indians and Italians as both «peace-loving» and «non-martial» people. He was fascinated by organizations like Balilla and helped his close friend Keshav Baliram Hegdewar in the conception of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). RSS was a militant right-wing Hindu organization (Rashtriya Swayamsevak means Nationalist Volunteers) founded by Keshav Baliram Hegdewar on the basis of Savarkar's ideas enshrined in *Essentials of Hindutva*. RSS owed its organizational structure to the Italian Balilla movement. Moonje established military schools to train young Indians and demanded the «Indianization» of the Indian army. The foundational idea of Mussolini's dictatorship, that is adherence to one leader, was enshrined as a chief organizational principle by the RSS<sup>10</sup>. Moonje, RSS, and Hindu Mahasabha came also in contact with Savitri Devi, born Maximani Portas, a French writer who became an intelligence agent of Germany and spied on the American and British officials in India. Portas idealized Nazi-Aryan ideology and her Greek Hellenistic identity. She tried to cultivate Hindu consciousness and foster a shared Aryan identity. She issued a warning to Hindus and prompted military mobilization and self-defence against Muslims as a precondition for consolidating a Hindu political identity<sup>11</sup>.

This militarism propagated by Moonje on the Italian model deeply influenced Savarkar and Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar, two prominent figures

<sup>7</sup> See the biography by A. Crisanti, *Giuseppe Tucci. Una biografia*, Unicopli, Milano 2020.

<sup>8</sup> M. Casolari, *In the Shadow* cit., pp. 1-24.

<sup>9</sup> «Kesari» was a daily newspaper in Maharashtra started by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the important Marathi right-wing thinkers. Started in 1881, between 1924-35 actively published news articles about Italy, Mussolini and the Fascist political system (ivi, pp. 34-35).

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> E. Leidig, *Hindutva as a variant of right-wing extremism*, «Patterns of Prejudice», 54 (2020), n. 3, pp. 225-26.

associated with 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hindu nationalism. Savarkar was deeply inspired by the Italian Risorgimento and by Giuseppe Mazzini. Savarkar supported revolutionary nationalism and wanted to overthrow British rule through mass action and violence. Savarkar's 1923 *Essentials of Hindutva* defined Hindu identity as being bound within the land between Indus and the Indian ocean. Those living in this area should be racially compatible and consider the territorial space as their fatherland and Holy Land. According to Casolari, however, Savarkar's notion of race gave more importance to cultural than biological factors<sup>12</sup>. *Hindutva* was written as a reaction to the mobilization of the Khilafat movement, a pan-Islamic force that pressured the British government to protect the sovereignty and territories of the Ottoman Caliph following the 1919 Treaty of Sèvres. The movement was incorporated within the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Gandhi and consequently, it bolstered Hindu-Muslim unity. Savarkar perceived Muslims as a threat to the Hindu population because of their powerful pan-Islamic ideology and their organizational shape<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, Savarkar was fascinated with European Fascism. He openly showed support towards Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and criticized Pandit Nehru for denouncing these countries. In his speech given in Pune on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1938, he repeated his resentment towards Nehru. In Savarkar's opinion, Hitler and Mussolini knew better than Nehru what was good for their countries. He pointed out that Nehru and Congress did not represent the interests of Hindu Nationalists who held no ill will against Germany and Italy<sup>14</sup>. Against the backdrop of the Anti-Jewish pogrom (the *Kristallnacht* of November 9, 1938), Savarkar took a congratulatory and conciliatory stance towards Nazi Germany which led to tensions between the militant Hindu organization *Hindu Mahasabha*, an active spokesman for Hindu interests, and the Congress. In contrast to Congress, who condemned the pogrom, Savarkar in one of his meetings as the President of the Hindu Mahasabha in the autumn of 1938, congratulated Hitler for liberating people who shared «the same blood and same tongue». Hindu Mahasabha published articles in support of anti-Jewish pogroms and stood against giving Jews refuge in India<sup>15</sup>. In his fundamental contribution to the understanding of modern Indian nationalism, Sumit Sarkar has pointed to the absence of anti-colonial nationalist themes in Savarkar's text *Hindutva*. Sarkar posits that this may have been to reinforce the idea that Indian Muslims and Christians are not genuine nationalists like Hindus, as they did not consider India as their Holy Land<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> M. Casolari, *In the Shadow* cit., pp. 50-62.

<sup>13</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *The Ideas of the Hindu Race in the Writings of Hindu Nationalist Ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s*, in P. Robb (ed. by), *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, Oxford UP, Delhi 1995, pp. 327-54.

<sup>14</sup> M. Casolari, *In the Shadow* cit., p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> S. Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames. Postmodernism, Hindu Fundamentalism, History*, Indiana UP, Bloomington 2002, p. 250.

The rhetoric of unsegmented ancient Hindu glory has also been evoked in Golwalkar's 1939 text called *We or Our Nationhood Defined*<sup>17</sup>. Golwalkar held Muslims responsible for the decay of Indian civilization and British colonization. According to him, a nation should be characterized by the unity of religion and culture. He equated Hinduism with Hindustan, the land of Indus in the Persian language, which is translated into the *land of Hindus* in the Hindu nationalist conception. Therefore, all those who did not belong to the Hindu race, religion, or culture fell outside the purview of the nation. Golwalkar took inspiration from the treatment of minorities in both Nazi Germany and the 1930s United States. In his opinion, Nazi Germany showed that it would be impossible for two intrinsically different "races" and cultures to peacefully co-exist. In the United States, emigrants had to forget their foreign origins and get naturally assimilated into the new white American "national race" by sharing the same aspirations, culture, and language as the majority of the population. Therefore, Golwalkar asserted that minorities could either be assimilated or subordinated<sup>18</sup>.

It is noteworthy that both Golwalkar and Savarkar drew inspiration from the West and tried to mould Indian society within the framework of nations that emerged in the West. Ironically, Hindu nationalism saw the West as a threat. The introduction of Western education was blamed for the dilution of Indian "values" as it challenged the status quo of the bourgeois intelligentsia who led the Nationalist movements. Fascism was the only ideology that appealed to the sensibilities of Hindu nationalists. The biological logic of racism used in the West was not appropriated by the Hindu Nationalists because Muslims were Hindu converts, and they belonged to the same bloodline. Cristophe Jaffrelot points out that the biological aspect and the eugenic logic of Western fascism were underplayed by the Hindu nationalists. They only appropriated the hierarchical and authoritarian model of society to integrate the familiar caste system<sup>19</sup>. The European logic of extermination was replaced by the logic of domination in the Indian context. Hindu nationalism worked in opposition to and challenged the anti-colonial secular nationalism led by Congress and Gandhi. This explains why Hindu Nationalism is still studied in Indian academia as a largely communal and radical movement<sup>20</sup>.

Casolari's research on the European origins of Indian radical nationalism offers a key to better understand the transcontinental links between far-right ideologies, and helps also to explain the relationship between Hindutva and other external forms of reactionary nationalism. Casolari provides an

<sup>17</sup> M.S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Bharat, Nagpur 1939.

<sup>18</sup> S. Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames* cit., pp. 251-53.

<sup>19</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism. A Reader*, Permanent Black, Delhi 2007.

<sup>20</sup> S. Goshal, *Race, Religion, and the Politics of Counting: Historicizing Hindu Nationalism*, in I. Banerjee-Dube-A. Ray (eds), *Nation, Nationalism and the Public Sphere: Religious Politics in India*, Sage, New Delhi 2020, p. 85.

evidence-based narrative of Hindutva's development and its linkages with its global precedents. Fascism and Nazism penetrated different parts of India and inspired communal struggles that worked beyond and within the framework of anti-colonialism. The promise of future progress and development at the expense of the declared enemy was essential to both Fascism and Hindutva. She concludes the book by arguing that like Fascism, Hindu nationalism focused primarily on the internal enemy, that is anti-fascists and political adversaries in Italy and Muslims in India<sup>21</sup>.

Even nowadays the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), India's ruling party and largest political community, claims, propagates, and nurtures Hindutva through its policies and law-making. Unlike its global antecedents, Hindutva metamorphosed into its more radical form which holds strongly anti-Muslim ideological content. The BJP's political backing of organizations like RSS legitimizes this ideology to the detriment of Indian secularism. The ideals of Hindutva have been now mainstreamed into the minds of an average Hindu citizen through the pervasive use of social messaging. Recent domestic political developments in India, the rise and ideological hold of the BJP on the Indian public sphere, and the consequent environment of religious turbulence have made Casolari's work even more important and timely.

The Hindu nationalists appropriated the truncated version of Hinduism originally crafted by the Western Orientalist scholars to propagate a monolithic Hinduism. Romila Thapar, the most eminent historian of Ancient India, has pointed to the absence of any form of "syndicated Hinduism" prior to the British colonial rule. She described «segmented identities» in terms of caste, region, and locality<sup>22</sup>. The advent of Muslims did not lead to the division of society into the binary of Islam and Hinduism. The crystallization of the society into this binary happened with James Mill's 1817 three-volume *History of British India*, where the Scottish intellectual segmented India into Hindu and Muslim India and portrayed the latter as a symbol of degeneration, thus making it necessary for Britain to colonize India. Governance required codification of laws, and clear-cut demarcations between Hindu law and Muhammadan laws were made. The pre-existing Brahmanical<sup>23</sup> texts like the *Sastras* were perceived as synonymous with Hindu law. Due to the political ascendancy of Brahmins, Hinduism became synonymous with Brahminism at the expense of other diverse traditions. According to Thapar, Orientalists thereby moulded Hinduism into a familiar Semitic model, and the texts translated from Sanskrit to English had undertones of Christianity.

<sup>21</sup> M. Casolari, *In the Shadow* cit., pp. 120-21.

<sup>22</sup> R. Thapar, *Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity*, «Modern Asian Studies», 23 (1989), n. 2, pp. 209-31.

<sup>23</sup> Brahmins (priestly caste) occupy the "highest" place in the four-fold caste system followed by Kshatriya (warrior caste), Vaishya (trader caste), and Shudras (the so-called untouchables).

As she puts it: «Deriving largely from the Orientalist construction of Hinduism, emergent national consciousness appropriated this definition of Hinduism as well as what is regarded as the heritage of Hindu culture»<sup>24</sup>.

However, such a self-reflexive historical position is vehemently contested by Hindu nationalists who assert the presence of a glorious ancient Hindu past. Hindu nationalism deems Indian culture as synonymous with this truncated version of Hinduism. Anthropologist Veena Das, a prominent award-winning anthropologist and a professor at Johns Hopkins University, called this process the «semitification of Hinduism»<sup>25</sup>. The leaders of Hindu Nationalism were heavily influenced by global models of nationalism. They kept themselves abreast with the developments of the world and constantly worked and reworked their strategies to create a model of nationalism that suited their ideology. It is also important to acknowledge the role of intrinsic factors that played a bigger role in the consolidation of Hindutva. The divide-and-rule British colonial policy of giving separate electorates to Hindus and Muslims<sup>26</sup>, the emergence of Muslim consciousness because of the Khilafat Movement<sup>27</sup>, the activities of the Muslim League, and the knowledge production undertaken by the British empire in India helped in the formation of Hindu national consciousness. Print media played an essential role in the dissemination of the ideas of Hindu nationalism. In the twentieth century, Hindu Nationalism was more anti-Muslim than anti-colonial. As noted above, organizations like RSS and Hindu Mahasabha represented Hindu Nationalism and garnered their resources to attack the Muslims. Muslims became the chief enemy of Hindu Nationalists. British rule was considered a break from the humiliation inflicted on Hindus by the Muslims that led India to degeneracy. A fictional history that focused on the glorious ancient Indian past was central to the imagination of Hindu Nationalism. In retrospect, British rule played a significant role in facilitating the construction of Hindu nationalism.

Nowadays, the activities of ruling BJP play a major role in mainstreaming Hindutva. Inflammatory political campaigns and speeches, social media, news channels, and print media have facilitated the propagation of ideology in regions and minds which were hitherto immune to Hindutva. While the comparison of BJP with Fascists and Nazis could be challenged, and even called a misleading equivalence, the ideological groundings of the party would suggest a different conclusion.

<sup>24</sup> R. Thapar, *Imagined Religious Communities?* cit., p. 229.

<sup>25</sup> R. King, *Orientalism and the Modern Myth of "Hinduism"*, «Numen», 46 (1990), n. 2, p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> The Indian Councils Act of 1909 recognized Muslims in India as a minority and introduced separate electorates for them.

<sup>27</sup> Khilafat Movement (1919-24) was a pan-Islamic movement that pressured the British government to protect the sovereignty and territories of the Ottoman Caliph following the Treaty of Sèvres. The movement was later incorporated within the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Gandhi and bolstered Hindu-Muslim unity.