

2021-07-12

# Introduction - South Asian nationalisms

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Version	Published version
Citation (published version):	F. Korom, J. Magnusson. 2021. "Introduction - South Asian Nationalisms." <i>Asian Ethnology</i> , Volume 80, Issue 1, pp. 5 - 18 (14). <a href="https://asianethnology.org/articles/2329">https://asianethnology.org/articles/2329</a> .

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/44026>

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## Guest Editors' Introduction

### South Asian Nationalisms

This article intends to raise questions related to nationalism in South Asia, while also addressing the rationale for this special issue. Is nationalism a monolithic construct based on a European precedent or is it something much larger that is developed pluralistically in a variety of contexts around the world? If the latter is true, which is our position, then how do we go about studying the various versions of global nationalism? We argue that good comparison is based on both similarity *and* difference. To make a case for multiple versions of nationalism, the articles included herein focus on the Indian Subcontinent. Each article looks at a particular country belonging to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the intergovernmental group representing the geopolitical union of states in South Asia, which was founded in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1985. The overall purpose of this collection of articles is to highlight the varieties of nationalism found in the region, with the goal of interrogating the idea of a singular form of nationalism inherited by postcolonial societies from their European colonizers.

Keywords: hyphenation—nationalism—nation states—religion—SAARC—South Asia—vernacularization

In his book *Playing the Nation Game*, Benjamin Zachariah (2011) asserts that too many Indian historians have tended to fetishize nationalism at the cost of excluding popularly perceived “inauthentic” communities by the muting of distinctive social differences based on such things as class and gender, for instance (ibid., 2). Historians have been “playing the nation game,” as he calls it, by taking for granted—and sometimes not even questioning—the metanarrative of a baseline “natural,” majoritarian, and state-supported form of nationalism. In the process historians, South Asian historians in particular, create a residual, default position from which history is rewritten.

In this special issue of *Asian Ethnology*, the contributors collectively want to address some, if not all, of the questions and issues pertaining to nationalism often left unattended by such default historians mentioned by Zachariah. Breaking with the metanarrative of majoritarian nationalism, the articles in this volume attempt to expose a sense of the plurality associated with the contestation of the multiple forms of nationalism at work in South Asia today. In other words, how do particular kinds of nationalistic expression interact with populist nationalisms often propagated by the state?

Looking at the development of the region over the recent past, we have seen movements arise in virtually every SAARC country that take a nationalistic stance as a means of revalorizing specific ethnic, linguistic, or religious communities, often at the expense of other religious or ethnic minorities. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of “vernacular” forms of nationalism (Korom 2006), the creators of which have crafted subtle ways of opposing the hegemony of the state to receive recognition on behalf of a downtrodden or forgotten minority group on their own linguistic and local terms. Clearly, new forms of nationalism seem to be on the rise in South Asia. Such forms need to be identified, interrogated, and critically analyzed to provide us with a better understanding of the current dynamics concerning cultural politics in the region. To this end, the guest editors of this special issue undertook the responsibility of organizing a workshop that would bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to explore nationalisms in all of the countries of South Asia, with the exception of Afghanistan, which we unfortunately excluded, due to reasons beyond our control.

The contributions are grounded mostly in the intricate processes of the post-independence making of South Asian nation states that resulted from decolonization.

To this end, we are essentially using the concept “nation state” without the hyphen, as it is by the hyphenation—the linkage of nation and state—that other, alternative nationalisms and their expressions are excluded and/or muted. Typical dictionary definitions of nation-state with the hyphen, for example, emphasize a sovereign state whose citizens are relatively homogenous in terms of language and culture, while stressing a genealogy of common descent. The contributions included herein recognize the state’s attempt to patrol and control heterogeneity, but they also emphasize the variations that nationalism takes in the public sphere, where contestation and resistance to governmental control can take many forms, ranging from dietary habits and street parades to dancing and singing.

After Arjun Appadurai’s influential writings (for example 2003) concerning globalization and the crisis of the so-called “nation-state,” what Antonsich (2009, 1) has termed the “crisis of the hyphen,” it is important to scrutinize the terms we use. Broadly speaking, Appadurai identifies the crisis as an incongruity between the nation and the state (*ibid.*). Much of the focus on globalization in recent years has been on migration and transnational mobility, how homogeneous nation states are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, multicultural, and multinational as a result of the transnational fluidity of people, things, and ideas that constantly crisscross national borders to test the boundaries of the state, which forces us to question the homogeneity subtly proposed by the term nation-state with the hyphen. While it is a relatively minute point, it is worth keeping in mind the absence of the hyphen as a way of approaching the multiple views of nationalism within any one given autonomous and independent country, as the articles collected herein suggest.

While this characterization of transnationalism is certainly true, our main reason for dropping the hyphen in “nation-state” is to make it possible for us to decouple nation from territory in a way that challenges the powerful hegemonic discourses on the homogeneous ideologies pertaining to nationalism that are propagated by states. We also wish to recognize the multiplicity of religious, linguistic, and cultural differences within the states of South Asia. Being a geographic region rich in cultures, languages, and religious traditions, we want to emphasize the plurality of traditions (Ben-Amos 1984), despite the official ideologies of states that want to impose a seamless form of homogeneity that resists difference as a way of emphasizing sameness and uniformity.

The contributors are concerned with top-down state-making and the nation-making projects of new states (Weinstock 2004) based on what we might wish to term the “reterritorialization” of South Asia after British rule and the internal colonization of minorities that followed thereafter, such as what occurred in Assam, when it was noticeably overrun by Bengalis who filled administrative vacuums left by the exit of the foreign colonialists. After the end of the colonial period the region was divided into independent and sovereign nation states that had to invent new and corresponding nationhoods in which everyone who lived within the state’s borders would belong (Zachariah 2011, 125). Slogans like, “from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, we are one” emerged rapidly across South Asia during the postcolonial period in an attempt to create unified and harmonious ideologies of belonging, despite the imagined nature of such popular sayings. Obviously, those nations had “no necessary

continuity with any existing collectives” (ibid., 211), nor any common past, sharing only confinement within new borders hastily created at the time of Independence without any plausible exit options. The ongoing tension between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, for instance, is one example of such confinement that is once again in the news, due to India’s abolishing of their portion of the state’s special status. Such post-Independence moves strategically involved a top-down disciplining of “actually experienced identities to conform to the requirements of a nationalism . . . available in the service of [a] state” (ibid., 4) and the “remoulding of other conflicting collective identities” (ibid., 16). Categories such as “culture” and “history” had to be reconfigured according to new borders that were conceived of as secular, civic nationhoods or in nationhoods defined by a dominant majoritarian ethnic and/or religious collective (see also Oommen 1999).

A generation of scholars, essentially following Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), has argued that nationalism was solely a product of the West, most importantly Europe. Gellner argues that nationalism is mostly a political construction imposed upon societies during the transformation from premodern agricultural lifestyles and modes of subsistence to modern lifestyles based upon industrialization and secularization. He further argues that the transition from agrarianism to modernity leads to cultural homogeneity, creating a so-called “high culture” that is distinct and separate from traditional forms of peasant practice. The European trend to modernize culture leaves very little room for religion, which must become subordinate or even insignificant to allow for the emergence of a cosmopolitan secularism. Gellner finally suggests that nationalism and modernity spread from Europe to other parts of the world as a result of colonialism. This normative narrative was challenged early on in colonial South Asia by certain members of the Indian intelligentsia who were well acquainted with European culture.

The Bengali Nobel Laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore, for example, infamously stated in his lectures on the subject that his homeland, India, never had nationalism, what he referred to as the “No-Nation” (Tagore 1917). Commenting on this, one perceptive observer suggested that India would have to break with the Western concept of nationalism, or at least give it a “new content” (Nandy 1994, 2). However, at the same time, Peter van der Veer had provided an important corrective to this notion in his book *Religious Nationalism* (1994), in which he argued that while Asia might not have had “secular” nationalism, they most certainly had “religious” nationalism that could be traced back to precolonial interventions. Our proposed workshop, as we had envisioned it at the time, was to be an attempt to use examples from throughout South Asia to examine whether or not a meaningful comparison could be made within one distinct cultural region (that is, the Indian Subcontinent).

As a collective, we wished to argue that there must surely be some parallels to be made in terms of resource materials drawn upon by religious nationalist actors in different South Asian countries. Despite their obvious differences, similarities, we assumed, must be identifiable and comparable on some level. But comparison must not just dwell on similarities, for differences are equally significant. Thus, drawing upon a golden, mythical past; the deification of folk heroes; the anointing of sacred geographical sites; and the composition of epic poetry are all vehicles for the

expression of a religious ideology constructed for nationalistic purposes throughout South Asia. Such similarities, though, could also be seen as only surface resemblances. Difference could lie on a deeper level in how such motifs were enacted by the agents who skillfully manipulated symbols to serve their own particular agendas, thereby transforming nationalism from a singular phenomenon to one full of nuanced pluralism (see Korom 2019a).

It was also our contention that such religious ideologies, once constructed, could be manipulated to foment divisive ethnic politics. Divisive politics then could lead to widespread communal violence, as has been the case in virtually every country of South Asia after each achieved their own independence. We wished to explore whether or not a comparative model such as the one adumbrated above might be a better way to think about religious nationalism in South Asia than simple isolationist analysis in which one single nation or culture is excised from its global or regional context for the purpose of analysis.

Comparison, once the backbone of humanistic and social scientific research, has been sidelined over the past few decades as culturally relativistic methods have proven more dynamic for meaningful cultural analysis (see Freidenreich 2004). Despite this, comparison seems to be making a comeback, since globalization and transnationalism demand it, due to deterritorialization, which has led to broader frameworks for studying the so-called “transnation” (Scher 2004). We have gone from the “specter” of comparisons (Anderson 1998) to the “value” of them (van der Veer 2016) in just a matter of a few decades. Some would argue that the push for borderless studies is symptomatic of postmodernity, but is the current age in which we are living so utterly different from the age of colonialism in which nationalist ideologies were being formulated in Europe? Indeed, calls for walls and fences are resurfacing in both Europe and North America as a result of deterritorialization, which could very possibly lead to a resurgence of ethnic and linguistic nationalism worldwide as a result of populist politics, which is on the rise virtually everywhere on the globe, be it Brazil, India, the United States, or Poland. Thus, as a resurgence of nationalism takes place in many locations from Hungary to the United States, we might want to rethink how we study similar phenomena in seemingly different contexts, where religion still plays a much more vibrant role in civil affairs (for example, Kingston 2019). What do India and Serbia share, to cite just one provocative comparison, despite their seemingly topographical and ideological differences from one another (see Korom 2019b)? Good comparisons, we would argue, then, are based on significant differences, not just similarities, as the historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith (1982) has argued.

The line of thought indicated in the previous paragraphs led us to assume initially that the focus of our inquiry should be on religious nationalism. Taking our lead from van der Veer, whose aforementioned book on religious nationalism changed the way scholars generally think about nationalism in South Asia today, we originally set out to focus on how religion impacts the logic and workings of nationalism on the ground throughout South Asia, thereby expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the elephant in the room; namely, India. To this end, we invited a variety of international scholars coming from the disciplines of anthropology, ethnomusicology, folkloristics,

law, literary studies, political science, religious studies, and sociology to present their own musings on particular SAARC countries. We especially wanted to include countries that often get overlooked at South Asia conferences, such as the Republic of Maldives and the Kingdom of Bhutan, in order to get a better overall perspective on nationalism in the region. With generous financial support from the Crafoord Foundation and logistical assistance from the Swedish South Asian Network (SASNET), the participants in our workshop gathered in Lund for two days of presentations and discussions to see what sorts of similarities and differences would emerge when viewing nationalism from a number of geographical and ethnic vantage points around the Subcontinent. The articles included herein are the result of that gathering.

What we discovered was that there was no single way of depicting nationalism across the region, as Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Sumit Sarkar (2016) had already posited earlier. Chatterjee (1993, 21) makes the significant point that in the case of India, no singular version of nationalism ever existed. As such, models created for the study of nationalism in the West, such as Gellner's, might not be appropriate for countries in South Asia, where totally different systems of beliefs and practices led to the formulation of completely different and distinct ideologies that transcended such principles as caste, class, and gender in the past and continue to do so in the present. South Asian ideologies that demand loyalty do not have the capacity to create a unified culture, primarily in places like India, where there is an incredible amount of diversity with which to contend.

Religion, although often implicated in nationalistic expressions, is not always the central, motivating factor with regard to South Asia. In other words, there is no monolithic version of the phenomenon that applies to all of the cases that we, as a group, investigated. To account for this, we chose to pluralize the term nationalism in the title of this special issue. By talking about nationalism in the plural, we thus join a host of scholars, such as Dilip P. Gaonkar (2001) on alternative modernities and Smith (1990) on the plurality of single religious traditions, to name just two, who assert that simplistic and universal definitions of phenomena cannot account for the complexity of reality on the ground at any given period in time. Instead, we came to the conclusion that nationalism in the region is quite multifaceted, expressing itself in a variety of ways. It can be artistic (Mitter 1995), devotional (Schultz 2012), rhetorical and visual (Pinney 2004), linguistic (Kumar 2019; Mishra 2020), literary (Harder 2010), musical (Bakhle 2005), poetic (Korom 2006), choreographed or dramatic (Thobani 2017), celebratory or tragic (Tharoor 2018), comical (McLain 2009), violent (Brass 2003; Pandey 2008), monumental and memorial (Guha-Thakurta 2004; Jain 2021), folkloric (Korom 2019a, 2019b), invented (Korom 1989), environmental (for example, Gunnell and Sivaramakrishnan 2008), and even culinary (King 2019). There are truly no ends to the ways that nationalism can potentially express itself in South Asia. Hans Harder's (2010) edited volume on literary nationalism in India makes this quite clear, since there are so many vernaculars in India competing for legitimacy, sometimes at the exclusion of others (see also Korom 2010; Mishra 2020).

The articles in this special issue only touch upon some of the ways that nationalism plays an everyday role in people's lives, whether they know it or not. However, while



not being comprehensive, the contributors expand the field of nationalism studies in the region by providing case studies based on areas within which their own expertise lies. Such case studies beg us to look comparatively at how nationalisms operate. A comparative perspective is indeed what is needed, and now might be the right moment in time to return to this much-maligned concept, as we already suggested. Looking at nationalism comparatively allows us to see that similarities might exist structurally (for example, Korom 2019a and 2019b), but also forces us to see differences resulting from particular contextual anomalies that may vary from one country to another, as two recent volumes comparing India and China suggest (Elman and Pollock 2018; van der Veer 2013).

### The articles in this volume

Peter van der Veer, who initially inspired our collective inquiries, begins our volume by providing his inaugural musings on the topic. He focuses his attention once again on India by asking what transcends the nation. Van der Veer sees religion as the essence of the nation, when viewed from the perspective of *hindutva* or Hinduness (Jaffrelot 1993), the current dominant ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that was in 2019 reelected for a second term after a landslide victory at the polls. This second term has allowed the party to become more emboldened, implementing some rather radical policies negatively impacting Muslims in the country. As we write, Indian Kashmir hangs in the balance after a bold move by the Modi government in New Delhi to remove the region's special status, thereby extremely limiting the province's autonomy. According to van der Veer, violence is absolutely necessary to protect and maintain India's sovereignty. To make this point, he walks us through the thinking of several theorists of modernity and the nation state, looks at how violence was earlier used in Europe as a mode of containment, then returns to India to explore *hindutva* ideology further. In so doing, he is able to show how this particular ideology of Hindu supremacy succeeds in the transcendence of secularism, thereby justifying the use of violence as a way of providing a bolster for the maintenance of the state.

Jürgen Schafflechner's contribution focuses on literary forms of representation that express nationalistic ideologies. He is particularly interested in how Hindus, as a religious minority community in Pakistan, are represented in popular literature, especially the horror novel genre. It is in the cheap and widely available Urdu digests dealing with fantastic and uncanny topics that one most often finds Hindus, especially holy men such as *sādhus*, portrayed as exotic others, the abject outsiders who are subject to "villainization" when they are depicted as being evil, despite the fact that they are citizens of a new nation who did not flee to the "other side," the majority Hindu side, during the partition that led to the birth of Pakistan after independence from the British Raj.

Jan Magnusson next takes us to the Western Himalayas where he looks at a cross-border region known as Baltistan. His focus is on how Baltis, an ethnic, linguistic, and minority community divided into two parts by the Line of Control between Pakistan and India, negotiate their minority status with the state. Using James Scott's (2009) idea of Zomia, he shows how the Balti minority practices the "art of not being



governed,” as Scott cleverly puts it. He argues that despite their stake in the nation, they also wish to attain more autonomy, especially control over cultural issues, such as writing, poetry, and other linguistic matters. As a result, there is a certain tension between the dual goals of self-rule and development, since the latter depends on the state, while the former threatens it. The Baltis thus are caught in a double bind. Being mostly Shi‘ite Muslims, they find themselves in the peculiar predicament of being both a religious minority and an ethnolinguistic one, since they are part of the broader Tibetan family. They are thus a minority within a minority, far outside the mainstream, both geographically and culturally.

Next we move to Nepal, where the legal scholar Mara Malagodi provides us with an analysis of Nepali nationalism that focuses on the perceived inviolability of the cow in the former Hindu kingdom at the expense of the Buddhist minority groups that populate the Himalayan region in the mountainous areas of the country outside of the Kathmandu valley. She indicates that because Hindus are still privileged in Nepal, a tension exists in the nation-building process. How can the state recognize cultural diversity and majority status simultaneously, she asks. To answer this question, she explores what has recently been termed “culinary nationalism” by Michelle T. King (2019). How does one justify the material needs and culinary habits of a set of culturally diverse groups of Buddhists who consume beef with the majority Hindu community’s insistence that the cow is sacred? Here is where Appadurai’s (1981) notion of “gastro-politics” is appropriate for thinking about how food can become politicized for certain religious and nationalist causes. Can a “national cuisine,” in fact, become a reality?

Mari Miyamoto, Jan Magnusson, and Frank J. Korom also explore the politics of meat as an expression of the use of Buddhist doctrine to voice nationalist narratives in Bhutan. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and secondary literature such as local newspapers and internet sites, the authors look specifically at the politics of the non-violent ritual practice of “animal saving” known as *tsethar* (*tshe thar*) and the tension between a public transcript of this practice as a model for good citizenship as well as a “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990) for slaughter and meat consumption, as in the case of the disposal of so-called “unnecessary cattle” and the employment of the services of Indian cross-border slaughterhouses. Meat eaters and slaughterers are targeted and stigmatized as the non-Bhutanese “other.” At the same time meat consumption continues and is legitimized by other practices within Buddhist doctrine as in the case of the monastic code of the “three kinds of pure meat,” in which a monk can consume meat as long as the animal has not been killed for the sole purpose of feeding him. Many of the same issues, by the way, have also arisen in neighboring Tibet (Kabzung 2015). The authors also argue that contemporary nationalism in Bhutan is an ethno-ideological form of religious nationalism that supports the concept of an exclusive Bhutanese ethnicity, even though it does not allow for the needs and desires of its ethnic and minority groups that depend on meat for subsistence.

These authors also suggest that the *tsethar* ritual is part of a larger framework of religious nationalism, within which Buddhist doctrine is at the core of a reinvention or “revitalization” (Wallace 1956) of Bhutan as a country governed by “soft” values

as well as a more ethical alternative to societies driven by materialism and economic growth, which might be called the “happiness quotient.” The problem is, however, that not everyone is so happy, especially expelled Nepalis who now live as stateless citizens in-between Bhutan and Nepal, as a result of neither country wishing to accept them as citizens after their expulsion from their host country where they worked as laborers for decades (see Budathoki 2019). Forced homogeneity can thus lead to both resistance and displacement. The beef issue cannot be totally apprehended in countries such as Nepal or Bhutan without placing it in the broader gastro-politics (Appadurai 1981) and culinary nationalism (King 2019), as we are calling it, in India, where the concept of the inviolability of the cow first emerged (Korom 2000; Bruckert 2019). The particular case of the cow in South Asia begs for more comparative cross-border analysis, which is precisely what the contributions on Bhutan and Nepal in this special issue do.

Frank J. Korom moves from Bhutan to Bangladesh, the youngest independent nation in South Asia, to explore how different expressions of nationalism are enacted through public displays, such as holidays during which parades and other such performative activities take on the special interests of different groups vying for political power and cultural capital. He focuses specifically on Ekushey (*ekuṣē*) and New Year's Day (*nababarṣa*) as memorial days for the intense expression of nationalistic sentiment, for it is outside of the domestic sphere in which nationalism is performed for mass consumption, but also where it is contested and negotiated between parties with a variety of interests and agendas, both official and non-official. Indeed, it is in the public sphere that the symbolic dimensions of nationalism expressed in such material objects as memorial architecture and sculpture need to be unpacked and interpreted to understand how they provide dynamic platforms for the multivocal expression of nationalist agendas by groups of people who have different visions of the past. Such sentiments can be orchestrated by the state to convey a sense of unification and secular harmony, but they can also be used as a critique of the powers that be, sometimes drawing on hidden transcripts to convey particular transgressive meanings not apparent on the surface. Performance is a means for disseminating alternative points of view to achieve particular agendas not always condoned by the state. Because public performances involve diverse audiences that engage with performance to mutually coproduce a variety of interpretations and meanings, agendas can become contested, Korom suggests, which leads to a variety of responses both by the state and individual actors. Performance can thus be viewed as a kind of embodied form of nationalism, as we find also in the contribution by Susan Reed on Sri Lanka in this volume.

Susan Reed also uses performance as a lens through which to view nationalism and violence in Sri Lanka, a country that is still wrapped up in an ongoing stream of conflict, despite the end of a long and bloody civil war that officially ended in 2009. To do this, she focuses on a Sinhala choreographer and dancer named Venuri Perera. Reed uses thick description to analyze one specific performance by Perera, showing how the creative arts and ritual practice can contribute to post-war reconciliation, social transformation, and female empowerment. In so doing, she contributes to a body of literature that shows how performance can often transcend or at least offset

the ethnic tensions and religious rivalries that result from a form of nationalism that has emphasized a majoritarian policy of “one nation, one language” at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities.

Boris Wille’s focus is on the Maldives, a country often not included in discussions of South Asia, despite its linguistic and historical ties to the Indo-Aryan world and its proximity to Sri Lanka, which is the much better-known island nation in the region. His study explores the relationship between Islam, the nation, and the state to argue that Maldivian constitutional practice is hybrid in nature, and thus torn between Western practices inherited from the colonial legacy and its long, rich history of Islamicization. Being an Islamic “republic,” he suggests that scholars of nationalism in South Asia need to take religious commitment much more seriously than they have in the past. Maldivian citizens are almost totally Sunni Muslims who take religious nationalism quite seriously, so scholars need to begin with that core identity to understand the current state of the cultural and political dynamics there.

Lastly, the political scientist Ted Svensson closes this special issue with an afterword in which he reflects on each of the contributions included herein by asking what we have to gain from studying nationalism comparatively in South Asia. He indicates that comparing nationalisms in the region is not an easy task, especially since the articles all take divergent methodological and theoretical paths. He further points out both cohesions and incongruities in the collected articles before concluding with his own reflections on the promises and perils of studying South Asian nationalisms.

In bringing these articles together as a thematic set focusing on the plurality of nationalisms found in South Asia, the guest editors hope that the reader will find and appreciate a rich set of readings that should set the stage for future debate, contestation, and research. We also hope that this special issue will find a place in the classroom precisely because of its broad scope. As South Asia continues to be a hot spot for the curated exhibition of nationalistic sentiments—be it by Buddhist monks in Bhutan and Sri Lanka, right-wing Hindu extremists in India, secularist Muslims in Bangladesh, vernacular ethnic groups in Pakistan, or legally minded Sunni Muslims in the Maldives and their Hindu counterparts in Nepal—we need to reflect more deeply on the pros and cons of nationalistic ideology, how it is displayed and performed, and what impact it has both at home and abroad. We have not really incorporated the important role that diasporas play in the construction of global nationalism (for example, Dufoix 1989; Rajagopal 2000), such as Hindu revivalism in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago or in Fiji and Mauritius, for example, where Hindu missionary groups such as the Arya Samaj were very active during the freedom movement (see, Vertovec 2000, 59–70), but it would be a worthy endeavor as a follow-up to the new paths we hope to have forged here. Indeed, in a world engulfed by globalization, it seems risky to overlook the important role that ex-patriots play in the nostalgic and economic reconstruction of their homelands. Finally, we hope to have collectively raised the issue of and provided some reflection on both the “specter” and “value” of comparison in the study of nationalisms.

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