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## *Hindutva futures*

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*Arkotong Longkumer*

It is widely acknowledged that the presence and power of the Hindu-right are here to stay in contemporary India. Even in the Northeast of India, often viewed as a recalcitrant periphery from the gaze of the Indian state, the diffusion of the Hindu-right ideology has found fertile ground. Their activities are not only limited to party politics – with many of the Northeastern states now under the political orbit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – but their presence is also in cultural and social spheres, where once the distinctness of one's identity was proudly asserted and now appears increasingly compromised. What are the implications and challenges and indeed what are Hindutva futures in this vastly complex and tempestuous region called the 'Northeast'? This chapter takes a programmatic approach to understanding the activities of the Hindu-right. In doing so, how might we examine the overarching ideas of their ideology?

Hindutva as an ideology is now quite familiar to those who are keen followers of Hindu nationalism in India. Coined by V.D. Savarkar in his book *Hindutva: Who is Hindu?* published in 1923 and republished in 1969, the ideas behind his book have spread across the fabric of India, textured by the presence of the Sangh Parivar, or the family of Associations, and embodied by the foot soldiers who comprise of numerous affiliated organisations that have emerged from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). According to the title page of Savarkar's book, 'A Hindu means a person who regards this land of BHARATVARSHA, from the Indus to the Seas as his Father-Land as well as his Holy-Land that is the cradle land of his religion' (1969). This way of being Hindu is Hindutva, or Hinduness. For Savarkar Hindutva comprises the 'totality of the cultural, historical, and above all the national aspect along with the religious ones, which mark out the Hindu People as a whole' (1969: iv). This totality is premised on another set of descriptive ideals relating 'Hindu' to Savarkar's notion of nation (*rashtra*), race (*jati*), and civilisation (*sanskriti*) (Savarkar 1969: 101). While at first glance this may appear to be a wholly secular principle of land, identity and culture, the introduction of *punyabhumi* (holy land) complicates Savarkar's vision of an all-encompassing Hinduness, by fracturing it with religious belonging: India is the sole property of the Hindus

alone. In this line of thinking Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism are excluded from this vision due to their holy lands being elsewhere (see also Sarkar 2012; Varshney 1993). How might this idea of Hindutva then move beyond the 'Maharashtrian crucible' (Jaffrelot 2007: 14) to places where these ideas might be unfamiliar? This is the challenge that the Hindu-right over the years has realised in the Northeast. They addressed this lack through the formation of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in 1964, which according to Thomas Blom Hansen was primarily created to work with the 'tribals' to check the growth of Christian conversion, and to 'galvanize Hindu society by consolidating its soft and vulnerable flanks' (1999: 103). One of the ways the VHP organised the activities of their vision was through groups like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (tribal welfare association) that started operating in numerous tribal areas. In numerous areas of Northeast India, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram have established their offices to counter the Christian hegemony and 'secessionist' tendencies of the various indigenous nationalisms by advocating for a united India based on inclusion and helping them participate in the mainstream of national life (see Longkumer 2017). The activities of the Hindu-right have been gradual, with mixed responses to their activities. Some states, particularly in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and in the Imphal valley of Manipur, are seeing the presence of Sangh Parivar becoming more established, while in other Christian dominated states such as Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, they appear to be more circumspect though with some visible successes (such as the BJP alliance with various regional political parties).

Despite all the Hindu-right's activities, there are still challenges to their vision of Hindutva in the Northeast for several reasons. First, the region itself has seen many indigenous nationalist movements emphasising their distinct identities particularly since Indian independence. For instance, Zaphu Phizo Angami, the well-known Naga National Council (NNC) leader articulated his vision of Naga nationalism premised on his construction of the 'Mongoloid race' in contrast to that of the 'Indian race' and how this incongruity plays out in the national arena in terms of territory, language, politics, and religion (Longkumer 2020: 56; also McDuie-Ra 2012). Second is the question of Christianity that the Hindu-right tends to focus on when emphasising the perceived threat to the Indian nation. Although Christianity remains a minority religion in Northeast India in terms of population numbers,

Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya are seen as majority Christian states, with sizeable number in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The Hindu-right argue that Christianity's extra-territorial allegiance has made people in the Northeast question their loyalty to their nation. To quote a poem from a publication of the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC), which states 'His gods are outside the land; So are his heroes and bosses; Accidentally he was born here; But for them he must die' (Joshi 2000: 46). Their work, in a large way, is to mitigate these challenges to nation building and argue for a more conciliatory and softer form of belonging. One way they do this is through the visual media of maps and their argument for a 'Greater India'.

One of the most striking aspects of my visit to Hindu right offices all across the region is their visual and material representation of regional icons associated with the different states. Aside from my work (Longkumer 2020: 190-229), there are no extant studies that explore the importance of iconicity and Hindutva in the Northeast (see also Bhattacharjee 2016; Kanungo 2012, 2011), though in other parts of India debates around icons and political life are more visible (Davis 1997, Pinney 2004, Kaur 2005, Jaoul 2006, Jain 2007, Gorringer 2017). In Nagaland, it is either Rani Gaidinliu, or N.C. Zeliang, well known Naga leaders associated with the Heraka movement (Longkumer 2010) who are celebrated as icons by the Hindu-right. In Arunachal Pradesh, it is Talum Rogbo, an important social reformer associated with the religion Donyipolo, or in Manipur and Assam, Tikendrajit Singh and Gopinath Bordoloi are recognised as freedom fighters who fought against 'Muslim and British invaders' respectively. There are also various images of deities and visual representations of maps, with Bharat Mata often figuring prominently.

These visuals appear on the walls of hostels, institutions and offices, or they are garlanded with flowers in various locations. They are also sold as artefacts in shops where people might want to buy these cherished objects representing a panoply of the Hindu right and the various regional figures that give credence to the message of the Hindu right as diverse and not simply from particular pockets of India. Maps are useful to visually depict the contours of a nation, its borders, where places meet, and most importantly to evoke a kind of anthropomorphic evocation of place-names and people etched onto the fabric of the map's canvas. The Hindu right have

indeed done this, to employ Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu's term, through 'sociograms' – that attempts to provide a 'visual record of extant social roles and relations' (2004: 601). It is these relations that are at the forefront of their conceptualisation of 'Greater India'. One should not be surprised, then, that the region is at the centre of this conceptualisation.

Accordingly, M.S. Golwalkar, the second *sarsanghchhalak* (supreme leader) of the RSS, evokes the idea of Akhand Bharat (or undivided India) to give us a sense of the expanse of his territorial imagination. Drawing on the epics (Mahabharata and the Ramayana) and the Puranas (a genre of Indian literature covering anything from cosmology to medicine), Golwalkar guides us through what he calls the 'expansive image of our motherland' from Afghanistan, Iran, Burma, Assam, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and the lofty Himalayas as the pinnacle of this eternal presence immortalised in myth, legends, deities and through events that have shaped the land (2000: 83). Imagined another way, Bharatvarsh, an idea found in the Mahabharata, covers the land that consists of an area from the 'Indus to the seas' and below the Himalayas (Savarkar 1969: 31-32). Whether it is Bharatvarsh or Akhand Bharat, there is a sense in which the expanse of this 'Greater India' is not only visually depicted through maps but constructed actively through myth and stories.

For too long, the Hindu right argue, the Northeast is viewed as a separate enclave, a site for 'secessionism', and appears in the lexicon of administrative and political talk as a 'recalcitrant periphery'. But, they say, the 'Greater India' idea requires that the Northeast is at its centre – a meeting place that links the Indic/Himalayan/Tibeto-Burman/Mon-Khmer linguistic and cultural groups, a place where the crossing and dwelling of these various identities ensues productive contact zones. For instance, they draw on the story of Krishna and Rukmini to illustrate the connection of the region with the rest of India since time immemorial, a phrase that is redolent with political overtones but also acts as a way to obfuscate precision in the service of untraceable national pasts. On 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018, the chief ministers of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Gujarat came together to celebrate the marriage of Lord Krishna and Rukmini during the four-day Madhavpur Mela (fair) in Gujarat. A few hundred 'cultural troupes' from the Northeast arrived in

Madhavpur as Rukmini's representative to symbolise the 'immortal journey' that she undertook from Arunachal Pradesh to Gujarat to marry Lord Krishna. The cultural razzmatazz and the political symbolism could not have been more striking through the slogan 'One India, Great India' (Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat – also sometimes translated as 'One India, Best India') (Longkumer 2020: 49). In Arunachal Pradesh that reaction was mixed. Some celebrated the event by reproducing visual accompaniment to this 'immortal journey' of Rukmini and Krishna as a local Arunachali couple in a pastoral landscape. Others were more circumspect of the connection and indeed the attempt by the Hindu-right to impose such a narrative when none existed. But perhaps that is not the point, argues one of the Hindu-right collaborators who took part in the event from the Arunachali side. He wilfully acknowledged that this Rukmini episode is not about precision; it is in fact the case that many versions of this Rukmini/Krishna story abound in Maharashtra, Gujarat and now Arunachal. It is also futile, he suggests, to go searching for archaeological evidence to support such claims, or to find contradictory accounts to question its veracity. What is more important, he notes, is to focus on the stories – and this is how, he said, 'myth becomes history' (Longkumer 2020: 62). Michael Jackson's ruminations makes a useful intervention when he says: 'To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination' (2002: 15). Some Arunachalis were keen to take ownership of the Rukmini story, and even argued that it provides social capital to be equated with Krishna and the larger Indic universe. Some even suggested that the story, gradually over time, will naturalise and become part of the narrative landscape – for these are how things are created.

It is important to return to Savarkar's conceptualisation of Hindutva and how the territorial designs that he imagined does not explicitly mention the current geopolitical reality of 'Northeast India'. Does this suggest that Savarkar was not including this region, that he was ignorant of it, or simply it was just a matter of fact that this was a region under Assam and by default included? These are the sorts of questions that come up in different conversations I have had with both locals of the region and various Hindu-right activists about how the Northeast fits in. For those opposing its inclusion, they point to these texts and argue that since 'Northeast' is

not mentioned or that Nagaland or Mizoram are not specified, then, it was never a part of India. The Hindu-right have a different way of understanding this problem. It is important to emphasise that these discussions are not about unearthing the truth, but there are different way of knowledge production and understanding of the world that might come into sharp relief with what people are used to. I am reminded of Sheldon Pollock's explanation of how space plays a central role in the Mahabharata, marked by indeterminacy and exoticism, 'where the culture of Sanskrit, and its message, a kind of political power, have application' (1998: 16). Similarly, a long time Hindu-right activist, Vijay, told me that one need not work entirely with precise place names. The first thing one needs to do is to establish roots, he said. For instance, if we ascertain certain established places mentioned in the Mahabharata (Pragjyotishpura – Guwahati in Assam – or the Lohit River – in Arunachal Pradesh) then we can plot the order. 'Behind Pragjyotishpura', he said, 'are the eastern mountains [Himalayas], and in the eastern mountain there is a river. Location and roots we get, but the place we don't know' (Longkumer 2020: 53). The fact that the Himalayas are already a part of the large mass of land stretching from the 'Indus to the seas' as Savarkar put it, then, the word 'Sindhu [Hindu] points out almost all frontiers of the land at a single stroke' (1969: 31). It is interesting that Savarkar's use of natural symbols like rivers and mountains to fashion the 'motherland' is given credence by Narendra Joshi's work on the Northeast when he says (and I quote this at length to drive home the final point):

After all we can hide or destroy papers, stones, paintings or pothis, but we cannot hide the Himalayas...and the mighty rivers originating from there. Those divine mothers are originating from the same place, innocent of the political boundaries and the associated heinous divisions they have to witness as they come down to the ground realities. But even now, with all our great "achievements", *we may perhaps negate the history [but] we cannot negate the geography of this region'* (2000: 7; italics added).

The toponymic renderings that I have discussed through Savarkar's idea of Hindutva, the way maps provide visual aids, the anthropomorphic presence of people onto the canvas of the nation, help solidify the presence of Northeast as an integral part of India. It further situates the Northeast as central to the visualisation and indeed conceptualisation of 'Greater India', not simply as an idea waiting to be

realised, but significantly as a place that has the power to unleash itself and to have application. What possible avenues and questions can we pose with regard to Hindutva that is no doubt the most important force in contemporary India? Would resistance continue or would the region capitulate to its dominance? Or would we see another 'Northeast' emerge that is both a periphery to the Indian state, but the centre of the vast highland region of Asia as it connects with various regional brokers, a contact zone where various cultural and religious practices synchronise effectively, a capacity to aspire for newer social experiments?

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