

Article

Hardwar: Spirit, Place, and Politics

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Abstract: This article describes the narratives and projections that shaped the contested character of Hardwar and the river Ganges as symbols *par excellence* of the Hindus' claim to India's sacred geography over the last two hundred years. It deliberates on the tactics and practices through which Hardwar's ancient and legendary status has been employed to assert Hindu identity and territorial claims *vis-à-vis* the colonial administrators, but also to exclude the country's Muslim and Christian populace. The purifying, divine land of Hardwar enabled the nationalist imagination and struggle for a Hindu India, even as it was instituted as a site for the internal purification of Hinduism itself, to mirror its glorious past. The article describes the contests and claims, based on religion and class, as well as the performance of socio-economic and existential anxieties that the sacred quality of Hardwar and the river Ganges continues to authorize and enable in post-colonial India. For this, we draw particularly on the Kanwar Mela, an annual event in which millions of mostly poor young men carry water from the river Ganges on foot, and often over long distances. We deliberate on the significance of the sacred water, rituals, and the journey in reinforcing these pilgrims' perceptions of the self, and their moral claims over the nation and its territory.

Keywords: nation; territory; colonialism; Hinduism; revivalism; Hardwar; Ganges; Kanwar

1. Introduction

In the iconography of Hardwar, its vaunted status in Hindu lore and imagination, nature surely has its own distinctive place. Here, the revered Ganges descends from the Himalayas to enter the great north Indian plains. Not surprisingly, the beatific scene of the river with the backdrop of the mountains, the massive waters charging into a usually torrid countryside, evoke feelings of awe and gratitude—a frightening joy quite aptly denoted by Immanuel Kant's notion of the “sublime”. Bathing in these holy waters purifies the body even as it cleanses the soul, ridding one of karmic sins. The Ganges is important to an auspicious beginning of life, as symbolized by the immersion of the infant's first crop of hair, as well as to the salvation signified by the offering of ashes from the cremation fire. Hardwar is a *tirtha*, a ford, where the heavenly world may be accessed through earthly actions. Offerings to the sacred river, temples, Brahmins, and alms-giving in general help provide for ancestors in the other world as well as beget high karmic dividends on the hither side (see [Feldhaus 2003](#); [Lochtefeld 2010](#); [Gold 1988](#)). It is one of the four places where *amrit*, the elixir of immortality consumed by the gods, is believed to have accidentally spilled on earth, making it perhaps the oldest of the four sites for Hinduism's largest gathering—the Kumbha festival, which Hardwar hosts every twelve years (see [MacLean 2003](#)).¹

¹ Often described as the largest religious assembly in the world, the Kumbha is held on an astrological occasion when Jupiter is in Aquarius (*Kumbha* or the pitcher in Hindi), while the Sun enters Aries.

This article is an exposition on the place of Hardwar as a sacred center of the formative imaginary of India as a nation, specifically a Hindu nation. It describes the narratives and projections that shaped the contested character of Hardwar and the river Ganges as symbols *par excellence* of Hindus' claim to India's sacred geography over the last two hundred years. It deliberates on the tactics and practices through which Hardwar's ancient and legendary status was employed to assert Hindu identity and territorial claims *vis-à-vis* the colonial administrators, but also to exclude the country's Muslim and Christian populace. During the colonial period, the purifying, divine land of Hardwar fired the nationalist imagination and struggle for a Hindu India, even as it was instituted as a site for the internal purification of Hinduism itself, becoming of its glorious past. The article also discusses the contests and claims based on religion and class as well as socio-economic and existential anxieties that the sacred quality of Hardwar and the river Ganges continues to authorize and enable in post-colonial India. For this, we particularly draw on the Kanwar Mela, an annual fair or pilgrimage in which millions of mostly poor young men carry water from the Ganges on foot, and often over long distances. We deliberate on the significance of the sacred water, rituals, and the journey in reinforcing these pilgrims' perceptions of the self, and their moral claims over the nation and its territory (see [Singh 2017](#)).

Like other articles in this special issue, this narrative essay demonstrates the protean and ambivalent significations of place as sacred. Thus, the discursive and practical engagement of Hardwar's sacred aura inspired India's anti-colonial struggle, but in claiming for Hindus the status of being the authentic natives of the land, it also sowed the seeds of a house divided. Hardwar's sacrality was as much a cause for the quotidian anxieties of the local Brahmin officiants about livelihoods and prestige, as it was for the epic struggles of some of the tallest leaders of the time to restore a wounded civilization and nation, to health. In Hardwar, like any other sacred place, the religious is no pure and isolated domain, but is entangled in political and market forces and everyday social relations, as much a consequence as a cause.

2. Controlling Hardwar—Symbols and their Power

The charisma of Hardwar resides in the superimposition of geography and history: the lofty heights and the river goddess affirm times bygone. Natural features accentuated by the many temples, legends, and place markers attest to ancient imaginaries, whose hold on the mind—in spite of all the force of rationality in our epoch—has never quite been exorcized. This makes Hardwar a remarkable resource, a place of exceptional social and religious *value*. Unsurprisingly, over the years it has become the subject and medium for many claims and conflicts over representation, status, and control. One dramatic example of the hustle for Hardwar's symbolic currency are the feuds between rival ascetic sects for precedence in bathing in the Ganges during the great Kumbha fairs.

Militant ascetic orders were in control of Hardwar and its fairs before the British occupation in the early 19th century. Being the first to get to the Ganges water on the holiest of occasions was a sign of the preeminent religious status of the sect, and oftentimes, they used their armed power to ensure their advantage. And not for show alone. The Sannyasis (a Saivite group) and their Naga (naked) warriors, who were the dominant power, had vital economic interests in such militant demonstration and reiteration of their control over affairs at Hardwar (see [Raper 1812](#); [Ghurye 1964](#), p. 196; [Shea and Troyer](#), pp. 196–97; see also [Lorenzen 2004](#); [Pinch 2006](#)). The fairs at Hardwar, the sacred occasion of Kumbh in particular, were a thorough blend of religious activities and one of the great markets of South Asia; instead of being antithetical, these factors only amplified the popularity of one another, giving the *mela* a multi-dimensional and lasting appeal.

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims/customers (who often brought their own merchandise) gathered along with merchants from widespread parts of Eurasia—including Persia, Afghanistan, Arabia, Ceylon, Georgia, England, France, Kashmir and other parts of the Himalayas, and the Indian plains extending up to Bengal and Gujarat. British visitors from the early 19th century report of clothes, spices, sauces, precious stones, and a vast range of animals, domestic and wild ([Hardwicke 1801](#); [Skinner et al. 1832](#); [Bacon 1837](#); [Raper 1812](#); [Francklin 1805](#)). The main draw for the British were

the horses from Persia and Afghanistan, for which the East India Company was a major customer. Domination of Hardwar, especially in periods of weak central authority, meant the ability to collect revenue from traders and market transactions, while also attesting to the militant ascetic sects' high religious status. With such lucrative avenues available, some of these groups were immensely wealthy, in control of major temples and businesses, and were also big landholders in the Hardwar area (Lochtefeld 2010).

British occupation in the early 19th century deprived the *sannyasi* orders of significant revenue from the market; furthermore, they lost their prominent land holding status after the promulgation of land reforms in independent India. They no longer enjoy the status they once commanded in Hardwar, but nevertheless, to this day, rival Sannyasi sects as well as other ascetic groups such as the Bairagis and Udasis continue to jostle in the Kumbha fairs with ceremonial displays of royal insignia and armed appearances. The bathing orders are now carefully orchestrated by the administration on the basis of prior negotiations with the sects and their hotly contested claims. The trade fairs likewise lost their significance once the British established a dense network of railways, and with the development of modern statehood and the industrializing economy of the 19th century, Hardwar's economic significance receded (see Lochtefeld 2010). This, however, can hardly be said for the symbolic value of Hardwar, which was only bolstered by the rituals of modern bureaucracy and interest group politics, as the city became a primary focus of the rise of nationalist Hinduism in *fin de siècle* British India.

The symbolic dynamics around Hardwar was revitalized after the bloody rebellion of 1857 when the British Crown took over the political dominion of India and vowed to stay out of native religious beliefs and practices. Paradoxically, this made religion a crucial tactical resource for a large number of interest groups, locally and nationally (see MacLean 2003). For the *pandas* (religious officiants) of Hardwar, social reformers, as well as freedom fighters, religion would become a crucial idiom of solidarity and a medium for contestations and claims against the British and other rival interest groups. In the early 1900s, an important instance of such politics was the dispute surrounding the construction of a permanent dam on the Ganges just before Hardwar which would allow a perennial water flow in the Upper Ganga canal, laid down half a century earlier. Although the water works would bring much needed irrigation, especially for the spring crop, the *pandas* argued that the dam obstructed the natural flow of the river, and hence its sacred integrity. Fueled by the *pandas'* anxiety over their livelihoods and their claims to safeguarding the holiness of the river goddess versus the colonial government's utilitarian interests, the canal dispute stretched for several years (Government of the United Provinces GOUP; Shri Ganga Hindu Sabha 1916).

To counter the British positioning as rational custodians of public welfare, a faction of the Indian nationalist movement embedded itself into these disputes as parties to the sacred legitimacy of the Brahmanical or Hindu claims to the river and land. A notable role here was played by the famous freedom fighter, Madan Mohan Malaviya who made Hardwar his turf, founding in 1916 the Ganga Sabha. The Sabha was a corporate body of Hardwar's *pandas* founded to put forth a united voice *vis-à-vis* the British government, but also broadly to ensure the purity of the city's sacred territory. This body continues to this day as the voice of the *pandas* and an active participant in the administration and local politics of Hardwar. However, when it comes to national politics, it was the Hindu Mahasabha founded in the city the previous year that played the bigger part.

For about a decade since the founding of the All India Muslim League in 1906, Hindu leaders in places such as Benares and Lahore had sought to create assemblies to consolidate Hindu groups. Such consolidation was seen as part of a pragmatic politics to unitedly lobby the British for Hindu interests and representation as Muslims had apparently done (e.g., establishment of separate Muslim electorates under the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909). But it was part of a much larger, historical narrative of the lack of unity in Hinduism, its many differences of sects, castes, and ritual beliefs (see Bapu 2012; Gordon 1975). For more than half a century, Hindu reform movements had agonized over this fundamental weakness that had rendered Hinduism unable to stand up to Islam and Christianity. A movement like the Arya Samaj (discussed later in the article), for example, sought to redress this

crisis of identity by presenting a golden, ancient past of the Hindus—prior to the corruptions and divisions—that had to be recovered for a glorious, unified Hindu religion. The Hindu Mahasabha (Hindu Grand Assembly), founded at the occasion of the Kumbha Mela in Hardwar in 1915, was a product of such apprehensions and aspirations of Hindu politics and identity (Bapu 2012; Gordon 1975; Raghavan 1983). With millions of devout pilgrims in town, the Kumbha presented a resonant occasion to assert the Hindus' majority status and their sovereign claim—timeless and holy like Hardwar, the Ganges, and the Himalayas—over this iconic territory, and by extension, the country. The Hindu assertion of their ancient glory and identity as well as the authenticity of their ownership of the nation was, as it were, reflected in the glorious landscape and temporality of Hardwar.

3. The Nation—Integrated or Divided?

The Mahasabha, at least initially, presented itself as an umbrella social organization of regional Hindu *sabhas* (assemblies) committed to the welfare of Hindus and not as an agency for anti-colonial political change. Apparently, Hindu nationhood and territorial claims were more germane and vital than the question of who controlled the government. For all its aspirations, the Mahasabha never really attained a large popular base, occasionally shining in the reflected glory of its few notable members (e.g., Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar) rather than the other way around. It did, however, serve as the launching pad for the leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the organization that has been the torch bearer of Hindu nationalism to this day. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar left the Mahasabha in 1925 to form the RSS volunteer corps with the mission of invigorating Hindu youth both physically and culturally (Jaffrelot 1999). It became the primary agency for the ideology of Hindutva formulated by Savarkar, who would later serve as the president of the Mahasabha (1937–1943).

For Savarkar (1923) “Hinduism” was a derived term, an exclusionary and unfortunate “ism”. “Hindu” was not a religious identity but the nationality of the inhabitants of the vast, bounteous land lying between the Sindhu (Indus river) and Sindhu (the seas), capped by the Himalayas. Hindus were people for whom this territory was fatherland (land of their ancestors) but also, and more importantly if controversially, their holy land. Savarkar counted Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists within the fold of “Hindu”, but excluded Christians and Muslims for whom India could be fatherland *but not* holy land:

Their holy land is far off in Arabia or Palestine. Their mythology and Godmen, ideas and heroes are not the children of this soil. Consequently, their names and their outlook smack of a foreign origin. Their love is divided. Nay . . . they must, to a man, set their Holy-land above their Fatherland in their love and allegiance. That is but natural. (Savarkar 1923, p. 113)

National identity is thus constituted by unqualified, primary devotion to the abode of the ancestors, and the histories and legends through which they imagined, loved, and cherished the land.

Among the most beneficent signs of Hindu identity were the *Sapt Sindhu* or seven rivers that course through the land, connect it and, like the multitude of sacred spots scattered all over it, make these legends from a hoary past a geographical reality today.² The waters of these seven rivers serve as a metaphor for the blood that connects Hindus today with their ancestors and their cultural and natural habitat.

To Hindu Dharma with all its sects and systems this land, Sindhusthan, is the land of its revelation, the land of its birth on this human plane. As the Ganges, though flowing from the lotus feet of Vishnu himself, is even to the most orthodox devotee and mystic so far as human

² Thus, (Savarkar 1923, pp. 111–12): “Sacred are its rivers, hallowed its groves, for it was either on their moonlit ghats or under their eventide long shadows, that the deepest problems of life, of man, soul and God, of Brahma and Maya, were debated and discussed by a Buddha or a Shankar. Ah! every hill and dell is instinct with memories of a Kapil or a Vyas”.

plane is concerned the daughter of the Himalayas, even so, this land is the birth-place . . . of that Tatvajnana (philosophy) which in its religious aspect is signified as Hindu Dharma (Savarkar 1923, p. 110)

Savarkar distinguished such Hindu-ness, or “Hindutva” as he called it, as an encompassing identity of all these religions that he saw as germane to India’s territory from Hinduism as a divisive and exclusionary term. For him, as it is for a number of academics today, the notion of “Hinduism” was largely based on a European colonial representation (see e.g., Pennington 2001). He expected that the concept of Hindutva would help consolidate a heretofore ambiguous and fractured politics of Hindu identity.

It may have been so, but ironically if unsurprisingly, the notion and politics of Hindutva has left a divisive rather than unifying legacy in Indian history. It made for a clear rift in the anti-colonial—and later post-colonial—politics of Indian nationhood thereby giving it a twofold character: on one side, the Congress and the communist parties with a putatively secular, modern progressivism, on the other, the RSS, the Mahasabha, and the Muslim League explicitly advocating the inevitable primacy of ethnic or religious identities (Gordon 1975; Jaffrelot 1999; Savarkar 1923; Godse 1948; Raghavan 1983). This fractioned politics would culminate in the division of India, the creating of Pakistan, and the massive human tragedy that followed partition. During partition, the vicious communalized atmosphere and distrust between Hindus and Muslims led to unprecedented bloodshed and violence. As murderous crowds went on a spree of killing, rape, abduction, and arson, millions of Hindus and Sikhs fled from Pakistan to India, Muslims from India to Pakistan, fearing for their lives (see Pandey 2001; Butalia 2017). Many Hindus blamed Gandhi’s naive pacifism and appeasement of Muslims for this grave wound to the nation, and for being callous and indifferent to the lives and interests of the Hindus. At least, this was how Nathuram Godse, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha and a protégé of Vinayak Savarkar, rationalized his assassination of Mahatma Gandhi shortly after independence:

[W]hen the top-ranked leaders of the Congress with the consent of Gandhiji divided and tore the country—which we consider as a deity of worship—my mind became full with the thoughts of direful anger . . . But even after the establishment of Pakistan if this Gandhian Government had taken any steps to protect the interests of Hindus in Pakistan it could have been possible for me to control my mind . . . But, after handing over crores of Hindus to the mercy of the Muslims of Pakistan, Gandhiji and his followers have been advising them not to leave Pakistan but continue to stay on. The Hindus thus were caught in the hands of Muslim authorities quite unawares and in such circumstances series of calamities followed one after the other. When I bring to my mind all these happenings my body simply feels a horror of burning fire, even now. (1948, pp. 98–100)

Twelve million people were displaced in these tragic events, about a million died, and “some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the ‘other’ religion” (Butalia 2017, p. 34). The events of the partition have remained as a traumatic memory, fueling chronic distrust, periodic riots, and sustaining divisive ideologies to this day.

4. Cleansing the Nation

Emblematic of the Hindus’ sacred claim over India’s geography, Hardwar and the Ganges served their part in the consolidation of the purported Hindu sects. At the same time, Hardwar could not avoid staging the inverse project of cleansing the religion, to revive the pure Vedic faith of the Aryan ancestors by shedding off all sorts of unseemly outgrowth—such as pilgrimages. For the Arya Samaj, perhaps the most successful of modern Hindu reform or revivalist movements, the golden age of the Hindu religion was in ancient times when the chants and aroma from the Vedic ritual fires wafted across the north Indian plains. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the renowned founder of the Samaj, arraigned mercilessly against idol worship for many decades (see e.g., Saraswati 1875). Insofar as

Swami Dayanand was devoted to the revivalist reform of Hinduism in the age of colonialism and nations, he could scarce avoid making Hardwar a key theatre of his activity (see [Graham 1942](#)).

Dayanand visited Hardwar first during the Kumbh Mela of 1855 as a young *sannyasi* in search of his own salvation. On that occasion, he stayed away from the din of the fair, instead practicing yoga in the adjacent forest. After the fair and a brief stay at Rishikesh (about twenty miles upstream the Ganges), the swami wandered in the Himalayas for about a year seeking true enlightened *yogis* (practitioners of yoga) that legend said lived in hermitages and caves deep in the mountains. This proved to be a fruitless mission that left him disenchanted and skeptical of Hindu mysticism. Dayanand then roamed the river valleys and towns of north and central India for several years, surfacing into public life again in about 1865. Eschewing his search for the elusive project of personal salvation, and seemingly influenced by the politicized social environment after the brutal colonial crushing of the 1857 rebellion (the “sepoymutiny” in colonial vocabulary), Dayanand now set on a mission of revolutionizing Hinduism and revitalizing the masses with success unprecedented in the history of modern Hinduism ([Graham 1942](#); [Jordens 1978](#)). His ideal was reviving the pristine Vedic religion that, believed Dayanand, could rival and exceed the cultural and political achievements of the Abrahamic religions. Taking leave of his guru to visit the Kumbh Mela of 1867, Dayanand this time set himself up in a small hut right in the middle of the fair, with a banner “Pakhand Mardhan” (Refuting Hypocrisy). He preached day and night against idol worship, denouncing “pilgrimages with such vehemence that a storm of opposition arose” ([Farquhar 1915](#), p. 126). Multiple commentators speak of his fearlessness in condemning pilgrimages during this great fair and in the middle of millions of devout pilgrims (see [Graham 1942](#)). Such audacity would have been fatal, had it not been for the fear of the British colonial administration.

Dayanand soon realized that his words were falling on deaf ears; he was up against the world. Discouraged, he is said to have roamed on the banks of the Ganges for a year till he resolved on a multi-pronged social program of reforming Hinduism. From here on, Dayanand would: (1) relentlessly engage in theological and moral disputations with leaders of various sects of Hinduism; (2) start schools and seminaries to propagate his theological doctrines; and (3) write books and pamphlets to propagate a rational understanding of the Vedas. Over the next several years, he went on a whirlwind tour of the major centers of Hinduism in north India (see [Jordens 1978](#); [Graham 1942](#)). Besides spreading his message of Vedic revivalism and rationalist faith, he actively condemned pilgrimages, idol worship, the usage of sandalwood marks on the forehead, counting beads—ostensibly the majority of popular Hindu rituals, as superstitious gobbledygook. By the time he returned to the next Hardwar Kumbh Mela in 1879, again castigating the folly of pilgrimages and the activities of the *pandas*, Dayanand was a celebrated ascetic, the founder of the Arya Samaj. The Dayanand Anglo-Vedic colleges (DAV) would soon become a key part of the edifice of higher education in northern India. In 1902, the Arya Samajis under the leadership of Munshi Ram, one of Dayanand’s most accomplished followers, founded Gurukul Kangri, an institution of learning based on ancient India’s Gurukul system (see also [Ghurye 1964](#)). The Samaj’s flagship institution, Gurukul Kangri was established with the goal of revitalizing and teaching the pure Vedic religion—on the banks of the Ganges, a few miles away from Hardwar.

Despite the Samaj’s distaste for pilgrimages as among the many ills that had corrupted the Vedic religion, it is telling that the founders could find no other place as fitting and welcoming for their grand project as Hardwar. Students would be admitted at the age of six or seven, and they stayed at the Gurukul for sixteen years, away from their parents and unaffected by the sundry rituals of Hinduism. Here they were trained in Sanskrit, learned the Vedas, and the traditional method of theological disputations, while also pursuing the interface between Vedic rationalism and modern sciences ([Graham 1942](#)). Between their lessons, students would bathe in the Ganges four times a day. What better place than sacred Hardwar for the revival of Hinduism and national youth? Hardwar, while supporting national territorial claims based on folk religious sentiment and purifying rituals, could simultaneously authorize the internal cleansing of Hinduism precisely from such silly, irrational rituals.

The paradoxical relationship between the Arya Samaj's critical revivalism and the folk Hinduism it opposed was contentiously evident in the *Suddhi* or purification ceremonies (see [Graham 1942](#), pp. 454–68). Hindu leaders had agonized over how the Hindus had become a free reserve for other religions to feed on and expand. For centuries, Hindus were being converted, willingly or otherwise, while Hinduism itself did not have any mechanism for conversion into it. The Arya Samaj constructed a ritual process, initially borrowed from analogies and examples in the *Manu Smriti*, an ancient legal text, to restore to Hinduism people who had recently converted to Christianity or Islam. In addition to certain orthodox purification rituals of fasting and such, “re-conversion” included a second part of cleansing—bathing in the sacred Ganges. This obviously went against the grain of Dayanand Saraswati's ideology that was built on a fiery dismissal of such apparently futile practices. Dayanand had died by this time, but members faithful to the Swami's rationalism protested such infiltration of “degrading” rituals into the Arya Samaj, as in the following lambasting interrogation:

Do Aryas hold the praschit [repentance] ceremony of Hindus? Do they insist on the eating of cow-dung, paying of visits to the Ganges, and feeding of the Brahmans? . . . such praschit is degrading and a true Arya would never bow down to such unmeaning ceremonies[.]”
(Aryapatrika 1888, cited in [Graham 1942](#), p. 464)

Following such agitations, the purificatory ceremonies were changed to do away with the dip in the Ganges and other rituals that conflicted with the beliefs of the Arya Samaj.

5. Re-Claiming the Nation

Swami Dayanand's tirade against Hardwar was surely an exception. Since then, Hardwar along with the town of Rishikesh upstream has become the epicenter of Indian swamis and their veritable world conquering missions. From Sivananda's renowned Divine Life Society, which informed Mircea Eliade's classic *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, to the *asrama* (hermitage) of Ma Anandamayi, a mentor to Indira Gandhi, to Santikunj, the headquarters of the Gayatri Parivar, the now defunct *asrama* of Maharishi Mahesh, one time “spiritual adviser” to the Beatles who propagated the Transcendental Meditation technique, to Swami Satyamitranand of Bharat Mata temple fame, and more recently, the Ayurvedic entrepreneur and yoga guru, Baba Ramdev, who controls businesses worth more than six billion dollars, in the twentieth century the Hardwar region became the hub of a diverse range of spiritual entrepreneurship. These institutions are founded by charismatic, enterprising gurus with characteristic clienteles—Indian or foreign, educated and urban or rural and traditional—with revenue models built on the value opposition between Western materialism and Indian spirituality ([Strauss 2002](#); [Gooptu 2016](#); [Hirst 2016](#)). With headquarters on the banks of the Ganges, and satellite campuses in other parts of India and abroad, the gurus travel worldwide giving sermons on yoga and India's ancient wisdom and spirituality, conspicuously associating with fame and fortune and seeking “disciples” particularly among these ranks. They re-present the renovated power of the ancient secrets of Indian spirituality, including the sacred syllable Om, yogic exercises, and innovative meditation techniques.

Such romanticization of the ancients resonates with Dayanand's philosophy, except unlike him, the gurus are no critics of Hindu rituals and see no chasm between contemporary Hinduism and the Vedic faith. They are not social reformers in any strict sense and are largely betrothed to the cult of the individual, promising magnificent improvements of the self-help variety. If they have any reform message, it is usually (often conceited) advice about reforming Western society based on their own teachings ([Gooptu 2016](#)). The moral economy of the gurus' spiritual entrepreneurship almost requires them to be Janus-faced: they must present an aspect of universal peace and Hindu tolerance when abroad, while subscribing to some form of nationalist Hinduism to cultivate their sectarian base at home.

Relations, often symbiotic, between the gurus and politicians are particularly interesting because of their convoluted, and oftentimes shadowy quality. For instance, Hindu leaders in the Congress

party have been often drawn to the gurus (also called godmen), in part perhaps for their emotional support in the roller coaster ride of a political career. However, open association with the godmen undermines their secular appearance, which is an indispensable legacy and political necessity for the party (Hirst 2016). The actors must mingle in the shadows. And yet insofar as such relationships attest to their Hindu faith, they are a valuable political resource in a Hindu majority country, and specially with the specific guru's believers; not to speak of the guru, for whom the value of the political contacts lies precisely in being able to flaunt them to enhance their own status and following. Thus, contacts between, say, Narasimha Rao and Chandraswami or Indira Gandhi and Ma Anandamayi were maintained through a measure of deniability even as they engrossed the public and the media (Jaffrelet 2012; Hirst 2016).

If the perceived relationships between the Congress politicians and the gurus played to the Indian archetype of the king's relation with his Brahmin priest/adviser, the distinction itself fades away with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). A major connection between the gurus and the BJP is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Assembly) or VHP, an organization with a mission of connecting and organizing the Hindu people, with pride of place going to the swamis. Founded in 1964 by Chinmayananda Swami (of Divine Life Society), the VHP and its network of swamis have played an important part in the political ascendancy of the BJP in the 1980s (Alder 2015). Like the VHP, the BJP is a member of the Sangha Parivar, a group of Hindu nationalist organizations affiliated to the RSS. Its major leaders are often of an RSS background (e.g., the two BJP prime ministers—Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi), or surely vetted by the RSS. The BJP thus is indeed the party of nationalist Hinduism, and is a mainstream political forum for the nationalist sentiment that most gurus find hard to look beyond, despite their eulogizing of the tolerant character of the Hindu faith. The glorification of Hindu inclusiveness is itself frequently a back handed chastening of other faiths and a license for exclusion. The stage was thus set for a swami, such as the BJP's Yogi Adityanath known for his incendiary anti-Islamism, to assume the mantle of Uttar Pradesh's chief minister in 2017 and govern fully dressed in the ochre garb of devout Hinduism. The church's persistence in dominating the state is surely paying off.

The surge in the political fortunes of the Sangha Parivar began in the 1980s, and Hardwar and the Ganges played a prominent part in this story. Among the major events leading to its ascendancy was the Ekatmata Yagna (literally, "sacrifice for a united soul") that the VHP organized in 1983 (see McKean 1996; Mahanta and Mahanta 2015). The Yagna included a number of processions that crisscrossed the country for a month with water from the Ganges carried in huge jars (or *kumbhs*). The water was sold across the country, with the jars refilled from other rivers, temples, and lakes, a pragmatic option with the added interpretation that this symbolized the sacred unity of the country's water sources. The procession included trucks disguised as chariots with mounted shrines dedicated to Ganga Mata (mother), Siva, and Bharat Mata (the nation as mother goddess). There was much emphasis on the one-ness of the Indic religions—including the "sects" of Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism—on the model of Hindutva, a Hindu nation united by a common heritage.

Of particular interest in the procession was a mounted replica of the unusual seven floor Bharat Mata temple, dedicated to the nation deified as a mother goddess, which had been consecrated in Hardwar weeks earlier.³ In this temple, Bharat Mata, depicted as a goddess in her own right, is also elaborated by the deification of her iconic heroes, religious stalwarts, pious widows or *satis*, representations of the persona/power of chosen gods and goddesses, and a raised relief map of India

³ The deification of motherland as goddess in a modern, nationalist sense is traced to the song *Vande Mataram* (I pray to thee, Mother) that appeared in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandmath*, published in 1882. In the song, Chatterjee identified Bengal, the land *par excellence* of goddess worship that he hailed from, with the mother goddess in various forms such as Jagaddhatri, Kali, and Durga (Chatterjee 1972, pp. 324–64). *Anandmath's* fictional account is based on the Sannyasi rebellions of the late 18th century when groups of Sannyasis and Muslim fakirs unable to collect gifts/taxes from the local landlords clashed with the forces of the East Indian company.

marking major centers of pilgrimage. Every floor is a separate shrine of one such group. For example, the second floor has statues of twelve national heroes that include Savarkar, Gandhi, Sivaji, Rani of Jhansi and so on, while the fourth floor hosts the shrine of saints depicting the first Sankaracharya, Gautam Buddha, Guru Nanak, and Dayanand Saraswati among others.

Bharat Mata is presented on the ground floor as one enters the temple and then again on the fifth floor along with various forms of the mother goddess. Dressed in a pink saree, she is personified as carrying an urn full of milk in one hand and sheaves of grain in the other. This depiction partly draws on Abanindranath Tagore's 1905 illustration of Bharat Mata—a four-armed woman dressed in saffron robes holding sheaves of paddy, a white cloth, a book, and a string of beads. Tagore's connotations included the mother's (or motherland's) gift of nourishment, clothing, teaching, and learning respectively. By including the urn of milk, the Hardwar version of Bharat Mata further adds a coded reference to cow protection, which has been a key unifying feature of the politics of Hindutva and of anti-Muslim politics. In recent years, cow vigilante violence has increased to unprecedented levels with emboldened nationalistic Hindus attacking and lynching Muslims and some Dalits over suspected "cow smuggling", cow slaughter, or the transportation of beef, resulting in communal tension across India. Both groups are particularly vulnerable to violence and job losses because the meat industry is Muslim-dominated, while Dalits are usually responsible for disposing off cow carcasses.

There is a sort of cynical dog whistle politics involved here. While to the average Hindu, this call for explicit avowal of reverence to the apotheosized motherland appears as natural, such worship is a profanity (*haram*) in Islam.⁴ Hindu groups and politicians have frequently used this tactic for anti-Muslim propaganda by making a routine public display of seeking explicit devotion to Bharat Mata from Muslims, whose refusal or hesitation is brandished as treasonous betrayal of the motherland (Hafeez 2018; Press Trust of India PT). In this discursive structure of the self-fulfilling prophecy, their foreign essence stands proven and irredeemable.

The politics of the Ganga and of Hardwar is, however, not easily compartmentalized. While it has surely served as a kernel for claims of Hindu majoritarian power and authority, these vaunted symbols have also served to contest disenfranchisement within the so-called majority. The Kanwar pilgrimage offers one powerful instance of the mobilization of the symbolic and moral power of the Ganges in such struggles (see Singh 2017; Lochtefeld 2010). The name of the pilgrimage comes from the *kanwar*, a pole that participants carry across one shoulder with containers filled with holy water from the Ganges hanging on either side. They usually fill their pitchers of water from Hardwar and carry it on foot for libations in their local temples and for domestic religious rituals home. In the process, the pilgrims frequently cover distances of a hundred miles or more, on sometimes bare feet and following various strictures.

Such ritualistic use of water from the holy Ganges since ancient times has resulted in fairs and festivals with processions carrying it across north India. Bayard Taylor (Taylor 1860), traveling through central Uttar Pradesh in 1853, writes: "The road was thronged with pilgrims returning from the Festival and the most of them women as well as men carried large earthen jars of Ganges water suspended to the ends of a pole which rested on their shoulders . . . I passed many thousands who appeared to be of the lowest and poorest castes of the Hindoos" (p. 117). The Kanwar pilgrimage from Hardwar, however, used to be a relatively inconspicuous and scattered event till the 1980s when it began to expand. It is now perhaps the largest annual pilgrimage in India, with more than ten million participants every year.

Part of this growth may be explained by the surge in nationalist Hinduism and the growing political fortunes and profile of the RSS and the BJP discussed earlier. Furthermore, in this age

⁴ In one such controversy in 2016–2017, two Islamic seminaries issued *fatwas* to Muslims to not chant "Bharat Mata ki Jai!" (Hail Mother India!) in response to an RSS declaration demanding such avowal of devotion to the nation as a mother goddess.

of television and globalization, ethnic identities began to morph and congeal in response to the unprecedented exposure to events and places hitherto distant—religious or not. But for the millions of young impoverished men who make the majority of the pilgrims, the Kanwar is more than a form of exclusive nationalism. For these working-class youth, growing up in conditions of poverty and desperation even as they are bombarded with fantasies of consumption, the pilgrimage often works like a chosen rite of passage to brace and prove themselves in the face of moral and existential challenges. In the neoliberal world order, a bulimic society that greedily appropriates people as consumers but cynically excludes them in the role of workers, the pilgrimage offers an alternative field to perform within and to be recognized (see [Young 1999](#); [Singh 2017](#)). Rejects of mainstream society and the economy, these participants make the pilgrimage a theatre to win social approval and to demonstrate their skills, stamina, and determination.

The participants find in this pilgrimage something to take pride in: the exhibited determination in continuing the journey despite pain and injuries, or conversely, the swagger of apparently effortless, barefoot walking for days, or by distinguishing oneself in speed, stamina, the heavy burden of the water, and the decorations of the sacred materials. Furthermore, this is a place to demonstrate their sincerity and talents, and to prove themselves to their parents and loved ones, by treading the sacred ground of the pilgrimage. In doing this good deed, they are also seeking the blessings of the divinities for life's many battles and the stacked odds against a secure life course. Calling on the great renouncer Siva (or Hara) who shuns and destroys the world, in a city named after him, Har-dwar (Gateway to Hara or Siva), these pilgrims are performing against a profane world even as they are preparing to take up imminent challenges of adult life and duty.

The Kanwar pilgrim is called *bhola*, which means a simple person without guile or deception, and is an epithet of Siva. Siva, the all-powerful and generous lord of Hardwar and the Ganges, likewise has no acumen for worldly games and prefers instead to live in a drunken stupor in cemeteries. For these young men coming of age amidst frightful economic uncertainty, in a country where more than 80 percent of workers must resign to working in the informal sector with little social security, and where about 60 percent of people survive on less than \$3.2 a day, identification with Siva allows them to give a positive twist to the impending threat of economic deprivation and social disgrace in their own lives ([World Bank 2018](#); [Williams 2015](#)). For thousands of years, Siva has symbolized an antinomian tradition subverting India's caste and status orthodoxies, and the participants are tapping into this potentiality of the Hindu pantheon.

These contests come alive in instances where a car, for example, may brush against a pilgrim's sacred water leading into its spilling. Any transgression of the holy water (leave alone spilling it) which they have carried on feet for days with much labor and emotional cathexis is a disaster. Since often intimate fears and desires are hanging by this precarious and difficult act of bringing the water safely to the shrine, such incidents are foreboding. "When a Kanwar's water gets spilled, he is unable to move . . . gets stuck to the ground, as if he had lost everything . . . prepared to die", ([Singh 2017](#), p. 150). In some of these instances, distraught at the tragedy of a fellow pilgrim, others may vandalize the car and turn violent. The Kanwar thus receives immense negative press, with the pilgrims frequently described as "loafers" and "ruffians". At the same time, in a country with extreme poverty and inequality, it is hard to ignore the conflict of classes as these poor young men looking at an uncertain future of foreboding poverty and desperation try to stake their claim over an increasingly alienating nation and its geography.

To a casual observer, however, the acts of the Kanwar participants, much like the ideas of Bharat Mata, Hindutva, and Ekatmata Yagna, appear to be expressions of the Hindus' unequivocal claim to the land, and by extension, the nation. Political organizations such as the VHP and the BJP therefore avidly claim to be the voice of the Kanwar pilgrims, and lobby for them with the administration and the media while also conspicuously setting camps to assist the wayfaring pilgrims. Perhaps the growth of the Kanwar is a part of this surge of nationalist Hinduism over the last few decades. Ironically, however, the BJP is also usually perceived as closer to neoliberal policies and a supporter

of market forces and big capital. As in many other countries, India's right-wing political parties blend the national and the neoliberal such that the nation can only be affirmed through economic and military glory, where citizenship is literally supposed to be earned financially, or through martyrdom. Those excluded economically due to notions of meritocracy are thus actively re-appropriated in an ethno-religious idiom. On the other hand, for these dispossessed subjects, religion—while being all the above things—is also an appeal to a higher justice, even as they resist and fight for their claims simultaneously in the name of religion and the nation. Their claims combining exclusion, rebellion, and prayers are no less ambivalent than the sacred Ganges which, as we have seen, can simultaneously authorize Hindu rituals and the purging of such rituals.

6. The Ganges: Polluted but Pure

In October 2018, Guru Das Agarwal, an environmental activist and retired professor, died after a 111-day hunger strike to pressure the BJP government into checking the degradation of the Ganges. The disposal of millions of gallons of untreated sewage every day, human waste from open defecation, remains of dead bodies, and industrial waste (including waste from thousands of tanneries) make it one of the most polluted rivers in the world. In Hardwar alone, 35 million liters of untreated sewage is disposed in the river every day ([The Times of India 2017](#)). Even as the Goddess Ganga continues to be revered by most Hindus who faithfully bathe in it and rinse their mouths with its putatively miraculous and self-purifying water, Ganges the river is dying from the demands of industrial development and the burgeoning population of Bharat Mata (see [Mallet 2017](#); [Alley 2016](#)).

This contradiction plays out in the politics of a party like the BJP, wedded at once to the holiness of the Ganges and to big capital whose interests lie in externalizing environmental costs. In his last letter to the Indian prime minister, shortly before he began his fast, Agarwal (who had changed his name to Swami Gyan Swaroop Sanand) denounced him for his opportunism in “earning profits from Gangaji”. The BJP had used the polluted state of the river Ganges to vehemently criticize the previous Congress government, but now that they were in power, they prioritized gains “only for the corporate sector and several business houses” ([The Wire 2018](#)). The prime minister never replied to Agarwal's multiple letters, but on his death, he tweeted in honor of the martyr's loyalty to the Ganges. Ironically, in his sacrifice, Guru Das Agarwal could only reinforce the value of the BJP's own premium on the politics of the Ganges.

The inconsistency of the Sangha Parivar's positions was also apparent in the controversy over the construction of the Tehri Dam, a large dam on the Bhagirathi, one of the two headstreams of the Ganges during the 1990s. A number of social movements had mobilized over the construction of this dam in an earthquake prone zone, and the environmental destruction and human costs associated with it. The VHP, reminiscent of the events over the Hardwar dam and the Upper Ganga canal a century ago, joined the opposition because of the purported violation of the holiness of the river and the nation it represented ([Mawdsley 2005](#)). As Ashok Singhal, a high ranking leader of the VHP put it: “I am not here to talk about the seismic condition of the dam site or about the cost-benefit analysis of the project. I am talking about Gangatva [Ganga-ness]. Gangatva is Hindutva [Hindu-ness]. Hindutva is Rashtratva [nationhood]” ([Sharma 2009](#), p. 40). The VHP seemed interested in the opposition to the dam only as long as it could associate the dam with the incumbent Congress government, and its putatively “pseudo-secular” Muslim appeasing politics. Once the BJP gained power, the opposition evaporated and Tehri became instead a symbol of the revitalization of Hindu nationality. Apparently, neither earthquakes nor millions of gallons of sewage can threaten or contaminate the river as long as it is in the hands of its chosen Hindu sons.

The Ganga's and Hardwar's powerful superimposition of legend over landscape, of the invisible world of the gods and the ancients over the Ganges and other locations in the area, make it emblematic of the concept of Hindu nationhood. Hardwar, and other sacred centers like Varanasi and Prayag (Allahabad), became the shared symbols of the heritage of a sort of pan-Hinduism or Hindutva that indicated a holy oneness in the face of many sectarian and regional differences. As part of this

process, these sacred centers also morphed an identity of the other, the intruder and stranger who was discordant with the holy land—whether the British with the construction of the Upper Ganga canal, or Islam and Christianity. To the extent, however, that Hardwar was such a venerable and popular center of Hindu faith, it could not avoid being the ground for Hinduism’s battle against itself, or its encounter with the Geist of the age. This paradoxical aspect of Hardwar is apparent in how it featured in the rationalist self-flagellation of the Arya Samaj, its obsessional search for a Hinduism purged not only of folk beliefs and the pauranic literature, but even of the canonical *smritis* (including the Bhagavad Gita) to find solace in the dim antiquity of the Vedas. This struggle reflected symptomatically in how the Arya Samaj found itself prescribing cleansing in Ganges water for conversion, despite its missionary efforts to free Hinduism from such “depravations”.

Looking at the sprawling Ganges and the quaint town of Hardwar sitting scenically on its banks, mixing religious piety with touristic curiosity, it is hard to imagine it as a place so rife in controversy and adversarial politics. And yet, as we have seen, this sacred, seemingly peaceful town and the river that blesses it have been at the center of much conflict even if the battles were fought far away from Hardwar itself. As a privileged locale of the sacred, Hardwar informs the many meanings and forms that the sacred may take: whether as nation, gods, territory, tradition, ancestors, or values, so much as the critical self-cleansing of the definition of the sacred itself as we saw with the Arya Samaj movement. The order of bathing in the Ganges can consecrate the religious as well as economic status and power of rival ascetic sects, while in carrying its water, one may demonstrate against one’s sorry economic and social plight. The sacred seems to lend itself as easily to a majoritarian social order as it becomes the vessel of simmering discontent against this order, the symbolic representative of muted voices. Guru Das Agarwal and the BJP, Gandhi and his assassin Godse, Dayanand and the *pandas* he despised, the British and the Ganga Sabha, the Kanwar pilgrims in conflict with their own selves, and the Muslims who are no less the children of this Ganga Jumna civilization, all exist side by side in this place, which remains as imaginarily fraught as it is magnificent physically.

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