Hindutva and Citizenship in India: Helping Refugees or Building Vote Banks?

By Siegfried O. Wolf, Jul 25 2016

One of the most noteworthy developments in Indian politics is the occurrence of a phenomenon often described as Hindu-Nationalism or Hindutva-movement (Bhatt 2001; Jaffrelot 2007, 1996; Zavos 2000). The movement refers to efforts to undertake dramatic changes within the political culture of India. This attempted transformation of state and society, which manifested itself through 'communal violence' – clashes between different religious communities especially between Hindus and Muslims (Engineer 2003; 1987) and actions aimed at challenging constitutional provisions such as secularism in combination with increasingly radical socio-political demands, have posed a threat to the Indian model of consensus democracy and have sadly lived up to bleak forecasts (Basu et.al. 1993).

Hindu-Nationalism must be understood as a societal phenomenon which finds its expression in the emergence of a social movement (Basu 2001). In this context one can state, that Hindu-Nationalism is carried by a widespread network consisting of various organizations, known as Sangh Parivar (family) (Mitra/Wolf/Schöttli 2006). Its roots can be traced far back to the colonial history (Embree 1992). Furthermore, the movement is equipped with an ideological foundation (Hindutva) to provide the numerous movement-organizations with a collective identity that functions as a common bond along ethnic-cultural and especially religious lines (Appaiah 2003; Mitra/Wolf/Schöttli 2006). A process which was indirectly reinforced by the British colonial power (Embree 1992). The division of the population in caste and religious groups created new collective identities in India. The evolution of Muslim group identity at the beginning of the 20th century fostered the construction of Hindu identity. Hindutva is one example of such identity projects (Wolf 2012). Basically Hindutva constitutes the semantic core of Hindunationalism, but it is not a clearly-determined, single concept, but a fluid system of contradictory thoughts, ideas, and notions of identity and citizenship, which have emerged over time and space (Wolf 2012). Hindutva draws on Indian as well as non-Indian, especially European, streams of thinking and is thus a phenomenon appearing in various modifications (Appaiah 2003). Those are linked by a common genesis of shared terms and codes[1], which have been created by the various *Hindutva* thinkers (Sharma, 2003; Kuruvachira, 2005 and 2006; Appaiah, 2003). As there were different thought processes which led to the formulation of *Hindutva*, the various elements which are today subsumed under the term have not

necessarily remained in a mutual and coherent relationship, but have developed different strategies—exclusive and more inclusive ones—in formulating citizenship based on Hinduism. This process finds its expression in the attempts of different thinkers, such as V.D. Savarkar, M.S. Golwalkar, Aurobindo Ghosh, B.G. Tilak, and Bhai Parmanand, to define *who is a Hindu*.

Against this backdrop, the most coherent and influential formulation of Hindutva was provided by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) in the early 1920s. Savarkar's contribution to the discourse constitutes the core of the 'system of Hindutva', which encompasses all spheres of society and functions like a matrix of codes, bringing together the various alternating and dispersed fragments of thinking and acting put forward by the *Hindutva* exponents. It reveals the inner nexus and inter-relations between the different processes, as well as the essential causality of all dimensions within the *Hindutva* concept, which generates both the intellectual foundation and the whole construction of Hindunationalist ideas of citizenship. His overall puzzle was how to build an Indian nation which is strong enough to ensure its independence (Swaraj, or "self-rule") in the international competition of nations. From his point of view Indian history had witnessed various attempts to build up a national entity but all had failed because of the inherent heterogeneity of Hinduism as the socio-cultural and religious system of the majority. Here, he identified a "perverted notion of tolerance" which leads to a lack of common accepted norms (identity) as well as disintegration of the (Hindu) people. To counter this, a homogenous community of the Hindus (Hindu-Sangathan) had to be built up in which all heterogeneous elements were to be excluded. To create such a society the establishment of a Hindu state (Hindu Rashtra) was necessary, including the socio-economic and political transformations in all spheres of national life. Therefore, the most crucial step is the definition of citizenship. In other words, the puzzle of who is a Hindu must be understood in the context of the definition of which person is a legitimate citizen. To operationalize this, he suggested a set of criteria consisting of three main elements Rashtra (common land), Jati (common blood) and Sanskriti (common culture) which should be used as guidelines in distinguishing between Hindu and non-Hindu. In essence, to be a Hindu one had to be born in India, one needed Indian (Hindu) parents, and one had to accept and internalize the Hindu culture.

It is significant to emphasize that Hindu-Nationalism is not a monolithic-block. Generally the term *Sangh Parivar* refers to an alliance of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary organizations which obliged themselves to the Hindutva-concept. In the center of the *Sangh* family stands a work-sharing triumvirate, existing of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Volunteer Organization) functioning as an organizational and ideological backbone (Andersen/Damle 1987; Embree 1994), the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP, World Hindu Council) covering all kinds of (Hindu) religious matters, e.g. reconstruction of Hindu-temples, and attempts to function as an umbrella organization of the numerous streams and sects among Hinduisms (Katju 2003: Veer 1994), as well as the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP, Indian People's Party), which assumed the task to represent the movement in the political-parliamentary sphere (Gosh 1990; Graham 1990).

The rise of the BJP (Gosh 1990; Graham 1990), which was founded in 1980 as a successor to the existing *Bharatiya Jan Sangh/*BJS (Baxter 1969)**,** founded in 1951, is one of the most significant political events in modern India. With its radical positions like the claim to (re-)build the Hindu-temple in Ayodhya, the abrogation of Article 370 which grants the Muslim majority state Jammu & Kashmir a special constitutional status, or the advocacy of a unified personal law (civil code), the party remained outside of the political mainstream for a long time and a shadowy existence in the political landscape of India. But a temporary decline of the until than ruling Indian National Congress (INC) resulting in the erosion of its "one-party-dominance" ("congress-system") created a political power vacuum into which the BJP could move in. Here one has to point out, that this was only possible through the massive support of its so called "non-political", cultural organizations RSS and VHP as well as their affiliated and/or subordinates organizations. Nevertheless, the rise of the BJP was also enabled by the negative perception of Indira Gandhi's emergency rule (1975-77) as well as her increasingly tutelage style of governance and various accusations of corruptions against her family as well as various INC governments.

Today Hindu-Nationalism from its own perspective is residing in a quite grotesque situation. To transform the secular concept of state into a Hindu one, the movement had to constitute itself as an anti-systemic force. However, instead of inducing the desired socio-political change it contributed – more unconsciously than consciously – to the consolidation of the existing democratic order. Contrary to the <u>demands of the radical wing</u> of the movement the BJP designed itself as a party which neither reject nor fights against the rules of the game or openly opposes the normative foundation of India's political structure.

The BJP had to realize quite early on that its rise and success in the parliamentary sphere was based on the emergence of an increasing political awareness and participation of the new middle class which identified the BJP temporarily as an electoral alternative. However, *Hindutva* as a political program (Appaiah 2003) proved to be neither the basis for a sustainable political mobilization nor, in the context of generating a cohesive impact on the Hindu-Nationalist organizations, capable of holding the radical and moderate wings as a closed, corporate movement together.

Here, the Indian electorate in 2004 and 2009, in which the BJP got defeated, made it clear that it is more interested in social harmony as well as law and order instead of an amortization and revenge for an artificially constructed humiliation of the Hindu community by Muslims and violence towards minorities. In consequence, the BJP developed a certain kind of reluctance to enforce radical *Hindutva* politics outside cultural and educational affairs. Other policy fields, especially economy and foreign policy followed the inner logic of power-oriented interests and the need for consensus policy. Prime Minister Modi's economic programmes 'Make in India' or 'Digital India' are exemplary for bridging the gap between radical and moderate Hindu-Nationalists since only and economic strong India will survive on the international struggle of the 'survival of the fittest', one of Savarkar's guiding principle in formulating Hindutva. Close related with latter one, is the Hindu-Nationalist 'believe in numbers'. In other words, the 'Hindu-fold' must be extended to bounce back the growing Muslim community. Subsequently, Savarkar included also religious communities originating on Indian soil like Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists in his Hindutva-identity construction. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that Prime Minister Modi is able to justify his latest proposal to amend the citizenship act along Hindutva-lines.

At the moment, the Home Ministry is drafting a bill to amend the Citizenship Act, 1955 to give citizenship or Long Term Visa (LTV) to non-Indian Hindus (most likely Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians too) who are victims of religious persecution in Bangladesh and Pakistan. There are approximately 200.000 Bangladeshi Hindus leaving illegally in India. The bill is supposed to get tabled in the coming monsoon session of the Parliament beginning on July 18. However, critical observers are forecasting fierce resistance from INC, proclaiming that the BJP is attempting to push a Hindutva agenda and building up potential vote-banks. Additionally, political groups from Assam, West Bengal and Tripura, states which have to deal primarily with the consequences of the illegal settlements from

Bangladesh, will oppose the new bill since they are rather in favour of sending the migrants back.

Besides the Indian internal political dynamics, there is the imminent threat that such a decision might create further campaigns of hate by Islamist radicals against the Hindus in Bangladesh. This is not only based on the accusation that the loyalty of Bangladesh's Hindus belongs exclusively to India but also it enhances suspicions about Hindu-Nationalists motives over granting only Hindu-refugee's citizenship and not refugees from other religious communities like Ahmadiyya or Shias. Especially latter one could serve as a rationale for radicalized Islamists to intensify their attacks on Hindus (and other religious minorities) in Bangladesh. Besides this, there is no doubt that the rise of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh will help hard-line Hindu-Nationalists in India to push a Hindutva-agenda by capitalizing on the threat of Jihadist terror, especially when international groups like Islamic State (IS) claim responsibility. This is gaining significance in states like West-Bengal known for its stance against communalist ideology and a region in which the BJP has not make much of an impact so far. In sum, the new proposed bill has the potential to create unrest in India as well as in Pakistan and Bangladesh, leading to a further deterioration of the security situation of religious minorities.

Notes

[1] Giesen identifies 'codes' as frames to interpret social reality. As constitutive features in forming collective identity, they are "purely symbolic structures, in no way bound to a location in space or temporal limits" (Giesen 1999). Based on the assumption that community is socially constructed, 'codes' are known as causal orientation marks, to facilitate the world for the individual as well as for the group. Examples for popular codes are: symbols, language or myths.

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