

2016

# Capitalism, Religion, and the Ideological Construction of Hindu Nationalism

Rothin Datta

Macalester College, rothindatta@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/poli\\_honors](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/poli_honors)



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Datta, Rothin, "Capitalism, Religion, and the Ideological Construction of Hindu Nationalism" (2016). *Political Science Honors Projects*. Paper 58.

[http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/poli\\_honors/58](http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/poli_honors/58)

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

Capitalism, Religion and the Ideological Construction of Hindu Nationalism

Rothin Datta

Advisor: Professor D.L. Blaney

Political Science

6 April 2016

### Abstract

Critics of Hindutva nationalism see it as either an elite conspiracy or a mass political movement with no necessary relation to the Hindu faith. I focus instead on its ideological deployment, treating it as a modern religious construction of Hinduism that legitimates capitalism—much like Christianity in the 17th and 18th century. I mobilize Slavoj Žižek, Erenesto Laclau, and Louis Althusser’s theories of ideology in order to demonstrate how neoliberalism and religious nationalism have emerged as the two main ideological mechanisms through which Hindu nationalism represses the class struggle at the very heart of contemporary Indian society.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help and support of my advisor, Professor David Blaney, whose knowledge, guidance and mentorship have been invaluable. I am also grateful for the support of my readers, Kiarina Kordela, James Laine, and Khaldoun Samman, whose classes and work have had a tremendous influence on this project and me. I am forever indebted to my friend and peer-reviewer Soren Dudley for challenging me to produce better work and for her limitless patience and support. Finally, I'd like to thank my family, friends, and housemates for putting up with me through a truly challenging intellectual experience.

## Table of Contents

<i>Title Page</i> .....	i
<i>Abstract</i> .....	ii
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	iii
<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	iv
I: Introduction.....	1
II: Location Ideology.....	5
III. Christianity and the Construction of Religion as a Category.....	15
IV. Christianity, Capitalism and Hindu Nationalism.....	24
V. BJP Ideology: Religious Nationalism and Neoliberalism.....	35
VI. Conclusion.....	50
<i>Works Cited</i> .....	52

## I. Introduction

In April of 2014, a general election was held in India to constitute the country's 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (Lower House of parliament). With roughly 800 million people eligible to vote, this was the largest election the world had ever seen. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, it was announced that the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), under the leadership of Narendra Modi, had emerged as the clear victor, handing the incumbent Congress party its largest electoral defeat in history. Furthermore, the victory marked the first time since 1984 that a single party has been able to claim enough seats—a simple majority—to form the government without the support of coalition partners.

The sheer magnitude of the victory and the resounding support both Modi and the BJP received in the build up to the election came as a major shock to the Indian left. Not only is the BJP, with its *Hindutva* (literally Hindu-ness) platform, accused of constantly violating the secular foundations upon which India was supposedly built, but Narendra Modi, the new leader of the country, was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat during the famous Godhra riots of 2002. During the riots he was accused of not only allowing but also inciting violence against the Muslim community (Chakkraborty). Furthermore, the left has struggled to explain how the BJP was able to sell its pro-business, neoliberal economic policies to a country that is largely constituted by farmers.

Modi and the BJP have shrugged off the accusations of their naysayers. The BJP has packaged itself as a development-focused, anti-bureaucratic party that believes that secularism can exist under the umbrella of Hinduism, which they argue is fundamental to Indian identity. Furthermore, supporters of the party argue that the BJP has given vest to

the public's frustration with the inefficient and notoriously corrupt Congress government that found itself wrapped up in a number of controversies during its last years in power.

Many "progressive" scholars, activists and artists have publically criticized the BJP for its supposed "anti-secular" and "neoliberal policies". For example, Ashis Nandy, whose work I will examine more closely, claims that the Hindu nationalism of the BJP is deeply ideological and promotes a modern perversion of the Hindu faith. Amrita Basu similarly notes that many critics of the BJP see its emergence as a sort of elite conspiracy, the perversion of a belief system in order to facilitate the dominance of the urban elite. Similarly, Shampa Biswas argues that the neoliberal economic policies of the BJP are strategically couched in nationalist rhetoric such that their implications for the common man are obscured (Biswas 124).

While I tend to agree that the Hindu nationalist platform of the BJP must be understood as a distinctly modern phenomenon, I strongly disagree with the progressive impetus to claim that it is entirely distinct from the Hindu faith. Instead, I argue that to understand the emergence of Hindu nationalism as a distinctly modern—but still religious—phenomenon, one must understand the inherently Christian structure of religion in contemporary society, and how this structure lends itself to the ideology of capitalism. Furthermore, I seek to demonstrate how Hindu nationalism operates ideologically in contemporary society, highlighting how the neoliberalism and religious nationalism of the BJP are both necessary and codependent elements of its ideology.

In order to demonstrate how the BJP ideology operates in contemporary Indian society, I analyze two seemingly unrelated social phenomena—the 2016 protests at

Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the BJP's "Make in India" campaign—and argue that they must be understood in relation to each other. The protests at JNU have been extremely controversial; a number of sensitive national issues—such as Hindu-Muslim relations—have been invoked and the BJP has been at the center of the dispute. "Make in India," on the other hand, is an international campaign launched by the BJP government in 2014. Its primary goal is to encourage companies, both national and international, to manufacture their products in India. The campaign—which is advertised across the world—promotes an elegant and modern image of India that still retains a cultural distinctiveness. Through these examples, I demonstrate how the construction of an organic and cohesive Indian identity, utilizing Hinduism, becomes central to the BJP ideology and how, as a result, certain communities—most notably the Muslim community—emerge as the structurally necessary 'other.' These nationalist sentiments mask the class and caste antagonisms at the heart of contemporary Indian society, and, I argue, are further used to buttress neoliberal policies that benefit the urban middle and upper classes. Furthermore, I argue that an understanding of the relationship between the religious nationalism and neoliberalism of the BJP is fundamental to an understanding of its ideological role in contemporary Indian society.

My argument begins with a reading of Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau and Louis Althusser's theories of ideology and an explanation of the ideological function of Hindu nationalism in contemporary Indian society within Žižek's Lacanian framework. Having developed this understanding of ideology, I then turn to Talal Asad's theory of the anthropological construction of religion and Alberto's Toscano's reading of Marx's



critique of religion in order to demonstrate how Hindu nationalism must be understood as modern religious phenomenon that defines itself within the distinctly modern and inherently Christian understanding of religion that has emerged in contemporary society. Next, I use Marx Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to demonstrate how Hindu nationalism performs an ideological role in contemporary Indian society that is similar to the role played by protestant Christianity in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. I further demonstrate, through Foucault's lectures on biopolitics, how the BJP, as a religious and political entity, has facilitated the separation of the market from religion and government, establishing the market as a "site of veridiction" (Foucault 32). Then, through a critique of Shampa Biswas's work on Hindu nationalism, I demonstrate how the religious nationalism and neoliberalism of the BJP ideology are inextricably tied together and not, as Biswas argues, the product of an elite conspiracy. Finally, I analyze the protests at JNU and the Make in India campaign as closely related contemporary examples of the BJP ideology and its simultaneous reliance on religious nationalism and neoliberalism.

## II: Locating Ideology

In order to conduct an “ideological critique” of Hindu nationalism in India, it is important to begin by explicitly defining ideology. To do so, I will use the theories of Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. However, in order to arrive at a robust theory of ideology one must first confront what Ernesto Laclau describes as “the death and resurrection of the theory of ideology” (Laclau 297). Citing Žižek, Laclau describes the death of ideology theory as emerging from the fact that “at some stage the frontier dividing the ideological from the non-ideological is blurred, and as a result, there is an inflation of the concept of ideology, which loses, in some way, all analytical precision” (Laclau 301). Critics of ideology theory further argue that it presupposes the existence of some “extra-ideological ground” from which ideology can be exposed (Laclau 298). Žižek and Laclau argue that this critique itself, in its emphasis on a necessarily extra-ideological space, represents ideology par excellence (Laclau 298). It is from this critique of the critique of ideology that the resurrection of a theory of ideology can begin.

Following Žižek, I structure my own ideological critique around the three axes of religion identified by Hegel: doctrine or “Ideology as a complex of ideas;” ritual or “ideology in its externality”; and belief or “Ideology at the heart of social reality” (Žižek, “The Spectre” 9). These axes in turn correspond to important theories of ideology that are given new meaning by the resurrection of ideology. Therefore, in this section of the paper, I will begin by describing what can be referred to as the resurrection of ideology, an understanding of which is fundamental to the theories of ideology that I will use to critique Hindu nationalism.

I begin with the problem of the extra-discursive vantage point that Žižek and Laclau argue has led to the abandonment of the theory of ideology. Simply stated, this critique of ideology suggests that all theories of ideology presuppose the existence of something real and some sort of illusion (the ideological mechanism) that obscures reality. Furthermore, the critique emphasizes the necessity—yet simultaneous impossibility—of locating an extra-discursive point from which a distinction between reality and illusion can be made. For Žižek and Laclau however, this critique itself represents ideology par excellence. In order to appreciate how they understand this critique as deeply ideological, the two fundamental and closely related presuppositions of the critique mentioned above—the necessity for ideology to exist as an illusion that obscures reality and the need for an extra-discursive point from which to critique—must to be explored.

The question of illusion, or what Žižek refers to as the ‘representationalist problematic,’ must be addressed first. Ideology, according to him, has nothing to do with an illusion that functions as a distorted representation of some true social content. He argues:

To put it succinctly: a political standpoint can be quite accurate (‘true’) as to its objective content, yet thoroughly ideological; and, vice versa, the idea that a political standpoint gives of its social content can prove totally wrong, yet there is absolutely nothing ideological about it. (Žižek, ‘The Spectre’ 15)

Therefore, the illusion is an altogether unnecessary component of ideology. In fact, one can conceive of a more insidious ideology that in fact relies on truths to further its ideological doctrine. The Hindu nationalist claim that Muslims should not be treated as a minority group in India because of their large population serves as a simple example (Ahmad). It might be true that there are a lot of Muslims in India, but emphasizing the number of Muslim obscures both the percentage of the population they represent (less than 20) and the fact that they are a marginalized community that faces widespread discrimination. Therefore the use of this ‘true’ claim can be conceived of as deeply ideological.

Conversely, something that proves to be a false claim might have nothing ideological about it. An example of this is the events preceding the banning of James Laine’s controversial book, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, in India. Political leaders of the Maratha Sevak Sangh were concerned with what they perceived as Laine’s pro-Brahmin bias. The depth of their position was broadly overlooked—both by supporters and critics of Laine’s book—and subsumed by the broader ideological narrative that either pitted Western scholars against conservative Hindu nationalists or Western imperialists against oppressed religious communities, depending on which side of the debate one considers. However, the supporters of the Sangh, in Laine’s own words, were in fact “practitioners of a kind of secular caste politics premised on ideals derived from European progressive, egalitarian political theory” and their only concern was with what they perceived as the scholarly hegemony of Brahmin-biased texts (Laine 165). The Sangh and its supporters probably did not intend for their protests to be perceived as acts

of Hindu nationalism or as the reaction of an oppressed Hindu community—at least not oppressed in relation to the Western academy. Although the claims of the party were in a sense illusory—Laine could hardly be considered an agent of the oppressive Brahmin community—and coopted by the broader ideological narrative, they can be considered “*stricto-sensu non-ideological*,” as Žižek puts it, in that they did not themselves reflect any relations of power in relation to the debate at hand (Žižek, “The Spectre” 7).

What remains unclear is how an ideological critique can continue to function without the existence of some extra-discursive ground. In order to understand what remains once we shed the “representationalist problematic” one must understand what Žižek describes as the “spectre”—a term borrowed from Derrida. Via Lacan, Žižek suggests that the spectre must be understood in relation to a reality that is “always-already symbolized, constituted [and] structured by symbolic mechanisms” (21). The problem that emerges from this symbolically structured reality is that “the symbolization ultimately always fails.” The limit to the symbolic, that which resists symbolization is what Žižek, via Lacan, refers to as the Real. The role of the spectre, then, is to fill the gap between reality and the Real, producing the impression of completeness or ‘closure’. As Žižek puts it, “The pre-ideological kernel of ‘ideology’ consists of the spectral apparition that fills up the hole of the Real” (21). This idea further complicates the distinction between reality and illusion by suggesting that reality itself has the structure of a lie. The role of ideology, then, is not to obscure the “truth”—which is itself characterized by a lack—so much as to provide the impression of a complete or foreclosed truth by covering up its fundamental lack.

At this juncture, in order to situate this theory in relation to “concrete social struggles” Žižek introduces the Marxist idea of class struggle as *the* prime example of symbolically incomplete reality and consequently as the “totalizing principle of society.”

He argues:

Although ‘class struggle’ is nowhere directly given as a positive entity, it none the less functions, in its very absence, as the point of reference enabling us to locate every social phenomenon—not by relating it to class struggle as its ultimate meaning (‘transcendental signifier’) but by conceiving it as (an)other attempt to conceal and patch up the rift of class antagonism, to efface its traces. (22)

Therefore, following the structure of reality as a lie described above, class struggle serves as the ultimate lack because all social phenomena are determined by their position in relation to it. Yet, at the same, it is itself the Real antagonism that is concealed by ideology. Therefore, according to Žižek, the invisibility of class struggle or “class peace” is already an effect of class struggle, in that it represents the dominance of one of the classes. However, what is most important about the interpretation of class struggle as Real and not part of the social totality is that it allows us to overcome the critique of ideology based on the lack of extra-discursive ground. What emerges is a social reality that is founded on “a primordial repression of an antagonism”—which is represented by class struggle (25). Therefore, the seemingly extra-ideological position necessary for ideology is itself “not real but the repressed real of antagonism” (22). What Žižek means is that ideology critique no longer needs some extra-discursive ground, in some purely

objective sense, in order to function. Through Lacan, we see that our social reality is built upon the repression of class struggle. A belief in the existence of a purely extra discursive ground itself serves only to cover up this inherent struggle and therefore, for Žižek, serves as an example of ideology par excellence.

In my ideological critique of Hindu nationalism, I will use this Lacanian model of ideology described by Žižek—fitting the theories of Laclau and Althusser within this framework as well. I will emphasize how ideology functions as a spectre that masks the antagonism as the very heart of the symbolic order, avoiding the “representationalist problematic” that I have discussed in this section.

I begin my critique of Hindu nationalism by describing the theories of ideology I will be deploying, organizing them, following Žižek, around three Hegelian axes: doctrine, belief and ritual. The first theory of ideology—ideology as doctrine—locates itself within a “composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts and so on” and is represented most significantly by the theory of Ernesto Laclau (Žižek, ‘The Spectre’ 10). Laclau’s theory invokes the Gramscian idea of hegemony and applies it to the discursive construction of concepts “as such”. For example, Laclau uses the example of the concept of ecology. He argues that there is always a “chain of equivalences” that determine the meaning of the term ecology—for example feminist, conservative, socialist, etc. (Laclau 309). There is no ecology as such in that ecology can only exist through these series. Therefore, as Žižek puts it, “which discourse will succeed in ‘appropriating’ ecology depends on the fight for discursive hegemony” and ideology emerges from this “fight for discursive hegemony” (Žižek, 12).

For example, Hindu nationalism, in its invocation of *Hindutva* (literally Hinduness), can be said to operate at this level. The nationalists claim that *Hindutva* is fundamental to Indian identity, even though it emerges from a specific religious tradition, because tolerance and even secularism are inherently Hindu values. Therefore, they argue people of other belief systems can co-exist under the umbrella of *Hindutva*. Simply trying to understand this as a cheap distortion orchestrated by conscious actors does not capture the depth revealed by Laclau's theory. For Laclau, distortion in the ideological sense does not simply entail covering up a hidden motive with a false, more easily digestible lie; it is an attempt to link "empty signifiers" (like *Hindutva*) to concepts such as tolerance and secularism (Laclau 306). Therefore, Hindu nationalists don't just try and feed the public some false version of Indian identity; they compete for discursive hegemony over Indian identity altogether, claiming that it is inextricably tied to the values of *Hindutva*. In Laclau's own words, "incarnation and deformation of particular contents through the expansion of equivalent logics is at the root of all ideological process—political ideology included" (Laclau 315).

The second form of ideology, exemplified by Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus, is ideology as ritual expression. Althusser's theory suggests that rather than functioning as "a mere secondary externalization of the inner beliefs," ideological practices, rituals and institutions "stand for the very mechanism that generates it" (Žižek 12). He argues, "It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there" (Althusser 154). For Althusser then,



ideology and ritual are closely related. What this means is that ideology does not simply act on a subject; the subject is “always-already interpellated” by the ideology (Althusser 165). Žižek uses the example of the fascists’ notion of the community-of-the-people (Volksgemeinschaft) to demonstrate how faith in rituals and practices took precedence over rational argumentation (Žižek 14).

Similarly, one might consider one of the most important events in BJP history, the Rath Yatra (chariot pilgrimage) of 1990, to be an important example of ideology as ritual. The narrative of religious duty was used to justify a mass procession across the country to destroy a mosque that was supposedly constructed at the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. Despite the fact that the theory about Rama’s birthplace was not substantiated by any important religious text, the invocation of religious duty through moral action was strong and used to gain the support of the Hindu community across the country. The Rath Yatra was used to consolidate the BJP support system by invoking Hindu duty, masking the class—and even caste—conflict within the Hindu community that had begun to emerge at the time. I will discuss the ideological nature of the Rath Yatra in detail in a later section.

It is also interesting to note that the BJP’s parent organization, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—literally National Volunteer Organization) prides itself on this kind of commitment to duty and action. The official mission statement of the RSS says: “In order to take our nation to the pinnacle of glory, the first and foremost prerequisite is the invincible organized life of the people without which even the highest national prosperity will crumble to dust in no time” (RSS.org). Therefore, the Hindu nationalist

emphasis on the organization of life and the reliance on duty can be understood as deeply ideological in terms of Althusser's theory of ideology.

Finally, I turn to ideology as belief, which is better understood in the terms of commodity fetishism. This form of ideology emerges from the dominant social presuppositions that reproduce social relations. Describing commodity fetishism, Žižek says "it designates not a (bourgeois) theory of political economy but a series of presuppositions that determine the structure of the very 'real' economic practice of market exchange" or the illusion of an extra-ideological dimension represented by the market (Žižek 15). Žižek borrows this model of commodity fetishism from Étienne Balibar who argues:

Now fetishism is not a subjective phenomenon or a false perception of reality, as an optical illusion or a superstitious belief would be. It constitutes, rather, the way in which reality (a certain form of social structure) cannot but appear. And that active 'appearing' (both *Schein* and *Erscheinung*, i.e. both illusions and phenomenon) constitutes a mediation or necessary function without which, in given historical conditions, the life of society would be quite simply impossible. (Balibar 60)

Therefore, within our ideological framework, commodity fetishism, as conceived of by Balibar, is the spectre at the very heart of capitalist society. An example of how commodity fetishism operates, according to Žižek, is how the influence of the media on the market is overlooked and how the media "structure our perception of reality in advance and render reality indistinguishable from the aestheticized image of it" (15).

While it is important to understand commodity fetishism as the underlying ideological force that structures economic life within capitalism.

It is around these three axes that I structure my ideological critique of Hindu nationalism. Furthermore, I argue that it is through a complicated network of ideological mechanisms, operating at all three levels of ideology, that a relationship between Hinduism—or Hindu nationalism—and capitalism emerges. I begin this critique, in the next section, by establishing the ideological relationship between capitalism, Christianity, religion—which I argue is itself, in some sense Christian—and Hindu nationalism.

### III. Christianity and the Construction of Religion as a Category

Talal Asad, Alberto Toscano and Ashis Nandy each make claims about the construction of 'religion' as a category in contemporary society. In this section, I compare these claims and argue that the arguments of the three authors can be used to situate Hindu Nationalism within the ideological framework provided in the previous section. More specifically, I apply Laclau's model of ideology and argue that the idea of "religion as such" is dominated by the discourse of Christianity, establishing a sort of ideological hegemony. Simultaneously, applying Althusser's model, I highlight the instrumental role of Christianity—and by virtue of its structural hegemony, other religions such as Hinduism—in relation to Capitalism. Therefore, I argue Hinduism as religion begins to define itself within an inherently Christian framework, serving as one of many "religions" that, like Christianity, seem to work well within the broader ideology of capitalism. This new Christianized mode of religion, I argue, is what is commonly understood as Hindu nationalism.

In 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological category,' Talal Asad seeks to demonstrate how the concept of religion has emerged historically. Asad does this through a critique of Clifford Geertz's definition of religion, by focusing on Geertz's treatment—or mistreatment—of symbols. Asad argues that religious symbols cannot be understood independently of their relationship with nonreligious symbols and social life, and that, therefore, a religion cannot be said to exist as an entity that is independent of the historical circumstances in which it exists or emerges. In fact, Asad argues that our

contemporary category 'religion' can be best understood through specific socio-historical developments within Christianity. Asad says:

At any rate, I think it is not too unreasonable to maintain that "the basic axiom" underlying what Geertz calls "the religious perspective" is *not* everywhere the same. It is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion. (Asad 48)

Therefore, Asad suggests that it is important to consider that the dominant understanding of religion is by no means trans-historical or trans-geopolitical. Not only have 'religions' changed significantly in content, the very idea of religion as a transhistorical concept is called into question. He goes on to argue that the understanding of religion as a category itself is heavily influenced by socio-historical factors specific to modern Christianity.

I argue that this historically Christian understanding of religion must be understood in terms of Laclau's theory of ideology and the discursive battle for hegemony. As Asad himself suggests, the specific structure of Christianity has gained a hegemonic status insofar as it forces other beliefs and practices to define themselves as religion within its specific structural framework. The implications of this structural hegemony could, in theory, lead to not only drastic changes in the content of other sacred practices, but also to the establishment of specific relationships between religion and other social, political and economic institutions. This is a significant point to highlight because, by adopting the specifically Christian structure of religion as separate from other institutions, Hinduism is forced to establish relationships with those institutions, most

notably government and the market, in the same way that Christianity has. For example, the market now regulates aspects of life that were once regulated by the temple, creating a natural tension between religion and the market as newly discrete institutions.

Furthermore, religious sentiments (such as a sense of duty) that once strongly opposed capitalist wealth accumulation are coopted by the capitalist ideology and used to emphasize the duty to work and earn a living. The significance of this point will be highlighted in the next section that focuses on the relationship between Christianity—in its various denominations—and capitalism.

Having situated Asad's argument in relation to Laclau's ideological framework, I turn next to Alberto Toscano's 'Beyond Abstraction: Marx and the Critique of the Critique of Religion.' Toscano argues that Marx's position on religion is often oversimplified and misrepresented. He argues that Marx does not simply dismiss religion as an imaginary invention of man, even though he is famously quoted referring to religion as "the opium of the people." Toscano suggests that while Marx's position is still quite antagonistic towards religion, his critique is far more nuanced and grounded in a materialist perspective. Marx, Toscano argues, believed that "in order to tackle the endurance of religious abstractions, we are to confront the social logic into which they are inscribed, and the dependence of these abstractions on given modes of production and social intercourse"—an argument quite similar to Asad's in its emphasis on religion existing in relation to non-religious symbols and institutions (Toscano 9). As a result, suggesting that Marx sought to critique religious abstraction simply by revealing it to be

“a distorted projection of human essence” would be ignoring the materialist core of Marx’s understanding of religion in capitalist society. Toscano argues:

It is not simply a matter of referring the illusory autonomy and separation of religious representations to a material basis, but of showing the socio-historical necessity and rootedness of the ‘phantoms’ and ‘sublimates’ of a *specific* religious form. (15)

In the quote above, Toscano highlights how the emergence of religious abstraction is fundamentally tied to socio-historical circumstances. Marx suggests, for example, that Catholicism played “the chief part” in the ancient world but not in the Middle Ages where the role was played by politics instead (Quoted in Toscano 15). Catholicism and politics, then, are historically significant to the time in which they were prominent and could not have had the same historical significance in the other time period. Toscano’s most prominent example of Marx’s perspective is that of Christianity. He suggests that Marx sees Christianity as “a theory (or logic) of capitalism”—once again, in a way that is reminiscent of Asad’s argument about the link between religion and non-religious symbols (Quoted in Toscano 16). This link between Christianity and capitalism is extremely important to my argument and will be addressed in detail in the next section.

At this juncture, it would be important to highlight how Toscano and Asad’s theories might strengthen one another and demonstrate the multiple levels at which ideology functions as religion. Asad’s theory strengthens Toscano’s by solving a fundamental problem with Marx’s perspective—its inability to explain the longevity of religion. For example, Marx might have trouble explaining why, if Christianity truly is

the religion of Capitalism, it has existed and even thrived for many years before the advent of capitalism. For Asad, this problem is overcome by the assertion that religion cannot be defined (as such) because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific. For example, Christianity, as we view it today, simply cannot be considered the same religion as what we refer to as Christianity from the medieval period because the “socially identifiable form, preconditions and effects of what was regarded as religion,” were completely different. Parallels can be drawn between this perspective and Marx’s emphasis on the “socio-historic necessity and rootedness” of religion (Asad 29). Unlike Asad, however, Marx seems to fail to recognize how acknowledging the historical rootedness of a religion, that both shapes and evolves and adapts according to the material conditions and the social logic of the time, calls into question the stability of the very concept of religion itself. Simultaneously however, Marx’s theory adds thrust to Asad’s. While Asad is able to describe the instability of religion—in form and not just content—Marx’s materialist perspective is able to explain how this instability is inherent to the reliance of religious abstraction on socio-historical conditions.

This simultaneous instability of religion as a category and the historical rootedness of its emergence exemplify Laclau and Althusser’s models of ideology. These models allow us to understand how Christianity reproduces the (capitalist) relations of production through its content while simultaneously exercising ideological hegemony over the structure of religion as such. What this means, as I will develop further in my discussion of Weber, is that capitalism acts as a sort of ideological fountainhead. Christianity acts as its ideological instrument, which in turn exercises (ideological)



hegemony over the structure of religion as such. As a result, the relationship between capitalism—the ideological fountainhead—and religions like Hinduism—that have begun to define themselves within an inherently Christian framework—becomes significant and worth exploring.

What also emerges from this model, however, is the possibility of a nostalgic view of non-Christian religions that have seemingly been co-opted by the ideological structure of Christianity—a common progressive response to Hindu-nationalism. Ashis Nandy exemplifies this nostalgia in his essay ‘The Politics of Secularism and The Recovery of Religious Tolerance’. Nandy provides a unique criticism of secularism, founded in the splitting of religion into two: religion as faith and religion as ideology. Nandy argues that faith is “a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural” and that ideology is “a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socioeconomic interests” (Nandy 61). In essence then, Nandy differentiates between what is traditionally considered religion and what he believes to be a modern perversion of religion that has emerged as a direct result of secularism. Nandy argues that secularism, a phenomenon inherited from the colonial state, which he argues is “definitionally ethnophobic and frequently ethnocidal” is incompatible with religion as faith (Nandy 61). For Žižek, this argument, in its claims about authenticity and misrepresentation and through its invocation of a complete religious community, would already be considered ideological. Furthermore, Žižek argues that this claim presupposes a form of multiculturalism that is itself Eurocentric. He argues:

Multi-culturalism is, *strictu sensu*, Euro-centric: only within modern-age subjectivity is it possible to experience one's own tradition as a contingent ingredient to be methodologically 'bracketed' in the pursuit of truth.

Herein resides the paradox of the Universal and its constitutive exception: the universal notion of the multiplicity of peoples, each embedded in its particular tradition, presupposes an exception, a tradition that experiences itself as contingent. (Žižek, *Matances*, 157)

Therefore, for Žižek, Nandy's claims must be considered ideological, but also rooted in a Euro-centric multiculturalism.

Similarly, Laclau might argue that the idea of Hinduism as such represents an empty signifier that is defined by the ideologically hegemonic discourse that determines its meaning. Therefore, neither Hinduism as faith nor Hinduism as ideology can be said to be truly "authentic." Instead, I argue, the emergence of Hinduism as ideology must simply be understood as a renegotiation of the idea of Hinduism as such under the hegemonic Christian structure of religion.

Similarly, Marx's understanding of Christianity as the religion of Capitalism and Asad's assertion that the modern view of religion is an inherently Christian one can be used to counter Nandy's theory of the division of religion into faith and ideology. What must be emphasized first is that, from the perspectives of both Asad and Marx, the form that Christianity has taken today—the one that has shaped our very understanding of religion as a category—could only have emerged due to specific historical circumstances. For Marx in particular, these circumstances are not purely incidental but directly linked to

the social logic and material conditions of the time. What is significant, then, is not only the fact that our understanding of religion is founded in Christianity, but the implications of the inherently Christian form we ascribe to so-called religions.

If we are to accept Asad's view of religion as a constructed category via Marx's materialist critique, we are forced to abandon Nandy's assertion that an authentic religion or "religion as faith" exists or once existed—a conclusion similar to the one arrived at via Laclau and Žižek's ideological critiques. This does not however, mean that Nandy's theory must be abandoned altogether. If we simply give up Nandy's romanticized view of the authentic faith-based religion of the past, and avoid value judgments by simply considering it a product of the socio-historical conditions of its time, the thrust of his argument can be preserved. What this means is that the ideological form of religion that Nandy argues has emerged today can also be understood as a product of modernity and its socio-historical circumstances. We might accept, then, that this ideological religion emerges as a product of secularization—insofar as religions reorient their relationship with government and the market in a distinctly Christian way—but this so called secularization itself must be understood as evolving from the inherently Christian construction of religion as such.

Therefore, we must not treat Nandy's ideological Hinduism—or Hindu nationalism—as a perversion of Hinduism so much as a secularized, Christianized Hinduism that has emerged historically along with the emergence of modern capitalist social relations. In order to understand the relationship between Hinduism and capitalism

more fully, then we must first turn to the relationship between Christianity and capitalism.

#### IV. Christianity, Capitalism and Hindu Nationalism

In order to explicate the relationship between Christianity and Capitalism and how this relationship is fundamental to the structure of contemporary Hindu nationalism, I will turn to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber. Following Weber, I highlight how, as a result of changes within Christianity and the emergence of “worldly asceticism,” “material goods have gained an increasing and finally inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history” (Weber 124). I go on to demonstrate, through the example of RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat’s controversial *Vijayadashami* speech in 2014—which was delivered a few months after the BJP government came to power—how the invocation of worldly asceticism is a significant component of the rhetoric of today’s Hindu nationalism. Finally, I highlight how this discursive shift in the relationship between religion and the market is coupled with a simultaneous shift in the relationship between government and the market, as emphasized by Michel Foucault in his lectures on the birth of biopolitics.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber explains Luther’s concept of “the calling:” a task set by God that governs one’s earthly life. While in its original conception, Luther’s idea of the calling was quite critical of material life and the accumulation of wealth, it began to transform over time as his involvement in world affairs led him to value work more and more. Luther himself did not elevate worldly asceticism to the level of spiritual asceticism. According to Weber, the Reformation—and Luther’s intellectual contributions in particular—lay the foundation for the later protestant emphasis on the “moral justification of worldly activity”(41). While Luther’s work demonstrated an

important shift in the understanding and significance of material life, Weber argues that the true relationship between the “Protestant Ethic” and “The Spirit of Capitalism” was forged in the works of Calvinism and other Puritan sects.

The Puritan texts, Weber notes, did not object to the accumulation of wealth as such, but to the “relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all distraction from the pursuit of righteous life” (104). Therefore, wasting time came to represent the deadliest sin. At the same time, these works—Weber uses the example of Baxter’s *Saints’ Everlasting Rest*—strongly preached the importance of bodily and mental labor. What emerged as a result of these two complementary teachings was the idea that labor represented a calling in itself. Weber quotes St. Paul, whose statement “he who will not work shall not eat” demonstrated the newfound significance of labor (105). While according to Weber, thinkers such as Baxter emphasized the importance of labor even amongst the wealthy—“[e]ven the wealthy shall not eat without working, for even though they do not need to labor to support their own needs, they like the poor, must obey”—eventually, the division of labor and occupations in society themselves began to be perceived as consequences of the “divine scheme of things”(106). The line of thinking that emerged emphasized God’s role in the creation of opportunities for profit making and how the accumulation of wealth “as a performance of duty in a calling it is not only morally permissible but actually enjoined” (108).

Weber perspicaciously observes how this line of thought was startlingly similar to that of Adam Smith’s theory of the division of labor. He argues:

A specifically bourgeois economic ethic had grown up. With the consciousness of standing in the fullness of God's grace and being visibly blessed by Him, the bourgeois business man, as long as he remained within the bounds of formal correctness, as long as his moral conduct was spotless and the use to which he put his wealth was not objectionable, could follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so. The power of religious asceticism provided him in addition with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God.

(120)

Weber demonstrates a newfound compatibility between "the Protestant Ethic" and "The Spirit of Capitalism". Furthermore, he does not simply demonstrate how the accumulation of wealth is justified as representative of God's will, he demonstrates how every individual, rich or poor, is required to work diligently within their role in the division of labor so as to fulfill their calling. The rewards for this diligence were no longer just heavenly; they were earthly as well. This argument might be understood in terms of Žižek's ideological critique; labor is ritualized and engrains the "spirit of capitalism" in the worker, masking the (Real) antagonism at the very heart of class relations, through the invocation of religious duty.

Weber's argument is significant because it highlights important changes within the content of protestant Christianity alongside the advent of capitalism. However, for the purpose of my argument, what is equally crucial is Weber's identification of a

fundamental change in the relationship between Protestant Christianity and the market. I argue that this change must be understood in the context of Asad's argument about the inherently Christian definition of modern religion as a category. By endowing the market with its own divine significance, then, Protestant Christianity facilitated the separation of religion and the market—a change that fundamentally structures our contemporary understanding of religion. It enforces the idea that one's duty is to work and that the market is the site of truth that governs earthly reward—a point that will become significant to the relationship between the market and the government as well. I argue that the simultaneous emphasis placed on Hinduism and neoliberal economic policies by Hindu nationalists must be understood in this light: not as a coincidence or as a response to political conditions but as a response to changes in the structure of religion within secular modernity. Here, once again, the shortcomings of Ashis Nandy's argument about Hindu nationalism must be emphasized. While Nandy is correct to argue that Hindu nationalism has not emerged as a result of a rigid culture or religion's failure to adapt to secular modernity, he still overemphasizes the role of secularism as a political phenomenon and—in his commitment to a romanticized view of earlier forms of Hinduism—fails to recognize how the secular, modern structure of religion itself has transformed Hinduism and its relationship with the global market.

Before turning to Mohan Bhagwat's *Vijayadashami* speech, it is important to emphasize that I do not mean to claim simply that Hinduism has turned into 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century Christianity, an argument that places India somewhere behind the Christian world on some fixed historical trajectory and one that sounds dangerously similar to the



argument Marx himself makes about India.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I argue both that there are elements of Hinduism—such as its emphasis on duty—that allow it to be mobilized in a uniquely Hindu way and that Hindu nationalist economic policies—which can be described as neoliberal—correspond to cotemporary global economic circumstances and not to those of early modern Europe. Therefore, while the changing nature of Hinduism and the emergence of Hindu nationalism might be understood as structurally congruent with early Protestant Christianity, Hindu nationalism remains a distinctly contemporary phenomenon.

Finally, I turn to the Mohan Bhagwat’s Vijayadashami speech as an example of the realization of worldly asceticism in Hindu nationalist rhetoric. The speech itself was a controversial one, not so much for its content—which was typical for a speech at such an event—but for the fact that it was broadcast on *Doordarshan*, India’s foremost public television channel (Kalbag). Although the affiliation between the RSS and the BJP is no secret, the RSS is still viewed as a distinctly Hindu organization, so the screening was viewed as an early sign of the Hindu-biased politics of the BJP government.

The speech begins by highlighting various Indian achievements in science, technology, philosophy and athletics. The significant result of these achievements, Bhagwat argues, is the elevation of India’s global standing. Bhagwat says:

We have also made the world realise that the common citizen of Bharat  
(India) takes part in the process of future building of her/his nation

---

<sup>1</sup> In his short essay on India, Marx condemns colonialism as such but argues that on the whole, its effects would be positive for the Indian people since the country would be forced into global capitalism and therefore forward in history.

through execution of her/his democratic responsibilities with maturity and enthusiasm as equal, if not more, to the prosperous and well educated citizens of so called developed countries.

Here, in the very beginning of the speech, Bhagwat invokes the idea of national success through the dutiful participation in democratic society. While defining success in relation to the so-called developed countries, Bhagwat also implies that prosperity and education might be natural rewards for performing one's duty and responsibilities—our first hint at worldly asceticism in the speech.

While the connection to Hinduism is not explicit, it becomes abundantly clear when Bhagwat says, “[r]ight from time immemorial to this moment, the unbroken current of national thinking that has prevailed in the vast region between the Himalayas and its extensions on one side and the sea on the other, has been known as *Hindutva*.” *Hindutva*, as mentioned before, literally translates to Hindu-ness. Through most of the speech, Bhagwat also celebrates many such distinctly modern ideas as democracy, only to go on and claim that they are in fact central to the Hindu value system<sup>2</sup>. The most striking example of Bhagwat's conflation of modern liberal capitalist values with Hindu values appears when he warns us against the persistent degradation of social values:

Our society still remains afflicted by the decay of many of our vital social values like honesty, social harmony, entrepreneurship, idealism, cultured conduct and other similar collective qualities, which are necessary for a nation to be strong. (Bhagwat)

---

<sup>2</sup> In ‘To Be Modern, but in the ‘Indian’ Way: Hindu Nationalism’ Shampa Biswas discusses the BJP's attempt to define secularism itself as an inherently Hindu value

Here, the value that seems to stand out from the rest is entrepreneurship. Whereas in the examples Weber provided, Protestant Christianity seemed to be concerned with how the market and the division of labor represented divine will, the Hindu nationalists also seemed directly concerned with claiming neoliberal values as inherently Hindu and, therefore, as an expression of a sacred order. I argue that this difference might be explained by the different historical circumstances under which these transitions have been made in each religion. While Christianity found itself adapting to the new capitalist ethos as capitalism emerged, Hindu nationalism has evolved in a postcolonial country that is trying to prove that it is in fact as good as the Christian capitalist West. We have already seen this comparison to the West in the first quote from Bhagwat's speech mentioned above, but it appears a number of times in Hindu nationalist rhetoric. Shampa Biswas, whose work I will discuss more fully in the section below, speaks to this issue directly, emphasizing the Hindu nationalist attempt to claim many distinctly modern values as inherently Hindu (Biswas 117).

Finally, it is important to highlight that although many of the Hindu nationalist economic policies are distinctly neo-liberal and pro-business, much of the rhetoric retains a moralistic tone that promotes development but condemns greed. For example, Bhagwat says:

What we are witnessing today is simply the same old, single minded materialistic, consumerist and a self centered ideology at work in overt or covert forms. It is this self-centered collective greed that gives rise to exploitation, suppression, violence and fanaticism. Precisely, operating on

the basis of such selfish interests by the western countries is responsible for a new incarnation of terror and fundamentalism that has emerged today in West Asia in the form of ISIS terrorising the whole world. (Bhagwat)

It is interesting to mention that in the quote above, Bhagwat describes greed and individualism as manifestations of Western culture. While Bhagwat maintains that the goal of *Hindutva* is for India to become the world's '*Vishwa Guru*' (universal leader") — with a particular emphasis on economic success and industry—he is careful to warn against 'the sort of individualistic moral corruption in these Western countries' and its consequences (Bhagwat). Once again, there are distinct similarities between Hindu nationalist rhetoric and the Puritan texts Weber critiques; while the Spirit of Capitalism is endorsed through worldly asceticism, there is still a great deal of caution about greed.

As alluded to in the excerpts of Bhagwat's speech already discussed above, Hindu nationalist rhetoric employs worldly asceticism as a means to an end that is itself distinctly modern. The Hindu nationalist understanding of the role of government is also distinctly neoliberal. Pankaj Mishra, describing Modi as a "symptom" of "capitalism's periodic and inevitable dysfunction" argues:

He was plainly the opportune manipulator of mass disaffection with uneven and unstable growth, who distracts a fearful and atomised citizenry with the demonisation of minorities, scapegoating of ostensibly liberal, cosmopolitan and "rootless" people, and promises of "development", while facilitating crony capitalism. (Mishra)

Besides the anti-minority—predominantly anti-Muslim—outlook of the party, Mishra seems to be referring directly to the neoliberal economic policies of the BJP and their centrality to Hindu nationalist politics. In order to demonstrate this neoliberal emphasis, I turn to Michel Foucault’s argument about the changing relationship between the market and the government at the advent of liberalism and the establishment of the market as “a site of veridiction”—a site of truth that grants earthly rewards for worldly asceticism. I argue that the discursive shift recognized by Foucault is distinctly recognizable in the BJP’s economic policies and further strengthens my claim about the ideological function of Hindu nationalism.

#### *Hindu Nationalism and The Market*

In his lecture on the birth of biopolitics, Foucault argues that a discursive shift takes place in the relationship between the market and government in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault 27). This shift can be best characterized as a move from an understanding of the market as a “site of justice”— i.e a well regulated institution that provided a livelihood to many people—to a “site of veridiction” —i.e a site of truth, that can only act as such if government intervention is minimized (32). This discursive shift is significant for Foucault because it precipitates a change in the relationship between government and the market; the market now acts as the mechanism through which the government can “discern which governmental practices are correct and which are erroneous” (32). It is through this inversion of the relationship between the market and the government that the market can be understood as a site of veridiction (32).

This understanding of the market as a site of veridiction, that undergirds neoliberal economic thought, is recognizable in the economic policies of the new Indian government. For example, in the opening remarks of his 2014 budget presentation, Minister of Finance Arun Jaitley notes that his government, in order to face the challenges that face India today, “is committed to the principle of “Minimum Government Maximum Governance” and argues that some of the main barriers to India’s economic success are “populism” and “wasteful expenditure”. Jaitley goes on to say:

We cannot go on spending today which would be financed by taxation at a future date. There is an urgent need to generate more resources to fuel the economy. For this, the tax to GDP ratio must be improved and non-tax revenues increased. We must remember that the decline in fiscal deficit from 5.7 per cent of GDP in 2011-12 to 4.8 per cent in 2012-13<sup>3</sup> and 4.5 per cent in 2013-14 was mainly achieved by reduction in expenditure rather than by way of realization of higher revenue. (Jaitley)

In this quote, Jaitley emphasizes reduced taxation and reduced expenditure as means to the construction of a thriving economy. Essentially then, successful governance is defined as minimum governance. This emphasis on smaller government clearly demonstrates the neoliberal inclinations of the BJP government, but more importantly, it also demonstrates the establishment of the market as a site of veridiction, insofar as government spending and economic intervention are condemned in favor of an unregulated market that will, apparently, organically lead to a thriving Indian economy.

What is significant about this development for my ideological critique is that it demonstrates how Hindu nationalism, as a religious entity, has reoriented its relationship with the market in a distinctly Christian way while also, as a political entity, reorienting the relationship between the market and government. I argue that this dual ideological function cannot be treated as a coincidence; it can be explained through an understanding of the structural hegemony of Christianity—that is itself coopted by “The Spirit of Capitalism”—and its fundamental role in the formation of contemporary Hindu nationalism. While I have briefly analyzed two Hindu nationalists texts in order to demonstrate this point, in the next section, I will turn to more concrete examples of the Hindu nationalist ideology and how both religious nationalism and neoliberalism have become instrumental in the ideological repression of class struggle in contemporary Indian society.

## V. BJP Ideology: Religious Nationalism and Neoliberalism

In the previous sections, I have argued that Hindu nationalism, as a unique historical phenomenon, has emerged from the interaction between the Hindu faith—a concept that is by no means stable across history—the inherently Christian understanding of contemporary religion in society today, and secular capitalist modernity. I have further argued that Hindu nationalism has, as a result of these interactions, begun to serve an ideological role that is similar to that played by Protestant Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, I have claimed that, as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, Hindu nationalism sustains this ideological role through linking religious nationalism with a commitment to neoliberal policies. With the help of Shampa Biswas’s article ‘To Be Modern, but in the “Indian” Way: Hindu Nationalism’, I seek in this section to demonstrate the interdependence of the religious nationalism and neoliberalism of the BJP and argue that the success of the BJP in the last election cannot be explained without both these factors. Having done so, I analyze the protest that began in February of 2016 at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi and the BJP Make in India Campaign to demonstrate how the ideology of Hindu Nationalism today continues to rely on both religious nationalism and neoliberal economic policies.

I begin by summarizing Biswas’s claims about the ideological role of Hindu nationalism through the examples of the Mandal commission controversy and Rath Yarta of 1990. Next, I turn to her critique of the Hindu nationalist construction of Indian identity as inherently Hindu and its reliance on the construction of a Muslim other, something I have touched upon in the previous section. Finally, following Biswas, I



highlight the role of *swadeshi*—literally “from one’s own country”—in the Hindu nationalist movement today before turning to an analysis of the protests at JNU, the Make in India campaign and their relationship in order to identify the ideological use of religious nationalism and neoliberal policies in contemporary BJP politics.

Biswas begins by arguing that the Hindu nationalist movement started to gain traction during the later years of Indira Gandhi’s government, when institutional hierarchies began to deteriorate and the central government began to effect power through “populist politics” that overrode local authorities. As a result of the disenfranchisement of local authorities, Biswas argues, two types of groups began to emerge: those that sought to address the concerns of the lower classes, castes and other marginal groups; and those that sought to reflect the interests of more dominant groups like the urban middle class and upper castes (Biswas 109). Biswas argues that the BJP, whose activities “deflected attention away from the caste and class conflict,” emerged as the most prominent group that reflected the interests of the elites during this period (Biswas 111). Here, in its primary function identified by Biswas, we already begin to see the ideological role of the BJP and Hindu nationalism, emerging precisely to suppress class conflict, in a way that is reminiscent of the repressed Real of class struggle identified by Žižek’s.

Biswas uses the BJP response to the implementation of the Mandal commission report in 1990 and the Rath Yatra the same year to demonstrate the two-pronged ideological approach of the BJP. The Mandal commission report, originally released in 1980, recommended that nearly 50% of government jobs and seats in government-funded

educational institutions be reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (110). In 1990, the Congress government, led by V.P Singh, decided to implement the recommendations. The BJP, Biswas claims, saw this as “not so much an effort to achieve distributive justice but one that divided a pre-existing (and organic) Hindu community”—once again, relying on the ideological idea of a complete community, suppressing, what Žižek might refer to as the antagonism at its very core (Biswas 110). Biswas argues that the upper-caste, middle-class urban electorate was extremely disappointed with the Congress government’s decision to implement the recommendations and “saw the BJP’s strongly articulated position on an indivisible, organic Hindu identity very appealing” (110). However, the response to the Mandal commission itself does not explain the mass appeal of the BJP.

While the economic and social climate in the wake of Mandal commission controversy was ideal for the BJP to gain the support of the middle-class that felt marginalized by the government’s economic policies, the organic Hindu identity purported by the party was still threatened by class and caste conflict within the Hindu community. In order to paper over these cracks in its belief system, the BJP orchestrated the famous Rath Yatra (chariot pilgrimage) of 1990. I have already discussed the ideological use of the Rath Yatra in the first section of this paper, highlighting how it serves as an important example of ideology as ritual through the invocation and enactment of religious duty. The procession, led by then BJP leader L.K Advani, marched across western, central and northern India to Ayodhya, the mythological birthplace of Hindu god Rama, in order to destroy a mosque, sparking a number of

violent communal riots. Biswas argues that the “emotive appeal” of the Rath Yatra allowed the BJP to mask class and caste conflict, leading directly to the deferral of proposed legislation regarding the Mandal commission. This might be understood as an ideological suppression of the lack of an organic monolithic Hindu community—and by extension the ideological suppression of class antagonism through ideology as ritual in the Althusserian model discussed above.

The Rath Yatra and the Mandal commission are often cited as two of the most important issues that led to the rise of the BJP in India. While the BJP’s religious nationalism is certainly central to its success, it is important to recognize that it was only able to gain mass appeal when its religious nationalism was coupled with an appeal to the material class conditions of its time.

While Biswas herself is cautious in her thoroughly historical approach, going only so far as claiming that “the conjuncture of these forces in the late twentieth century was not entirely coincidental,” I argue that the relationship between these forces is fundamental and derives from far more structural factors—the changing understanding of religion in contemporary society and the ideological hegemony of capitalism. In her essay ‘Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy,’ Amrita Basu argues that most critics of the BJP and its Rath Yatra make the mistake of treating the movement as an elite conspiracy that is purely political—exonerating ordinary Hindus from responsibility for the violence— or as mass movement—that mistakenly identifies the movement as a purely religious one

(Basu 56)<sup>3</sup>. I argue that Biswas, to a great degree, falls into the elite conspiracy category. Although she seems willing to acknowledge that the BJP appealed to very real class and caste struggles in order to gain support, she seems to grant the party itself too much agency, failing to acknowledge its ideological emergence in a broader historical context—something I have attempted to do in the previous sections of this paper. For example, Biswas sees the BJP as a political organization that “makes use of the discontents” generated by “the social dislocations caused by modernization and globalization” as opposed to as a symptom of the social dislocation itself (Biswas 108).

While I disagree with Biswas’s conclusion, I find her simultaneous critique of BJP religious nationalism and economic policies to be compelling. I will therefore highlight a few more of her important critiques of BJP neoliberalism and its relationship with religious nationalism and consider the structural necessity of a “Muslim Other” in the ideological construction of an organic and whole Hindu community. I will then turn to my own contemporary examples of BJP ideology at work.

Returning to the Mandal commission and Rath Yatra controversies, Biswas also highlights how they serve as important examples of BJP constructions of a “Muslim other” in order to gain favor amongst upper caste/middle-class Hindus. BJP leader K. R. Malkani explicitly alluded to this when he said, “while Mandal had divided the people, Ayodhya united the people” (quoted in Biswas 111). Biswas agrees that “[t]he ‘Muslim threat’ supplied the ideological threads with which Hindu Nationalism attempted to

---

<sup>3</sup> While I agree with Basu’s categorization of critics of the movement, I do not agree with her broader argument, which, like other liberal arguments I have addressed, refuses to acknowledge the religious nature of the Hindu nationalist movement and chooses to emphasize historical circumstance over structural change.

suture a fractured Hindu identity” (111). In fact, even beyond the Rath Yatra, the construction of the Muslim other continues to be an extremely important part of Hindu nationalist rhetoric; another important example that I have discussed in this paper is the BJP's insistence that Muslims do not represent a minority in India. Furthermore, Biswas argues that Muslims are homogenized “into one monolithic community; they are associated with essentialist negative characteristics such as dirt, excessive libidinal energies or animal sexuality, and backward cultural norms” (114).

I argue that it is extremely important to understand the function of the Muslim other in the Hindu nationalist ideology. In order for the ideology to function properly, it requires some other to constantly juxtapose the purported Hindu identity against. Making a similar point about the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, Žižek argues:

[E]ven if most of the Nazi claims about the Jews were true (they exploit Germans, they seduce German girls), their anti-Semitism would still be (and was) pathological—because it represses the true reason the Nazis needed anti-Semitism in order to sustain their ideological position. So, in the case of anti-Semitism, knowledge about what the Jews "really are" is a fake, irrelevant, while the only knowledge at the place of truth is the knowledge about why a Nazi needs a figure of the Jew to sustain his ideological edifice. (Žižek, “Objet a” 115)

Žižek argues that the anti-Semitism of the Nazis had less to do with the Jews themselves and more to do with the pathological ideology of Nazism. Similarly, the Hindu nationalist treatment of the Muslims must be understood as pathological and not

necessarily concerned with the actual Muslim community. In other words, the constructed Muslim other is less about Muslims and more a structural necessity for Hindu nationalist ideology.

The construction of the Muslim other leads us to another important ideological spectre within Hindu nationalist rhetoric—the reorientation of what it means to be Indian “structured along a Hindu/Muslim axis” (Biswas 112). More explicitly, Biswas argues that “[p]art of the Hindu nationalist project is to claim the essence of the Indian nation as primordially and fundamentally Hindu” (112). The BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations maintain that India has always been a Hindu nation, and have spent a great deal of time and resources glorifying its (Pre-Moghul) past. Biswas argues, as I have argued through my analysis of Mohan Bhagwat’s speech, that the idea that India is fundamentally Hindu implies that certain communities —most obviously the Muslim community—are not welcome in India. Furthermore, Biswas argues that two important issues arise from this characterization. First, scholars such as Romila Thapar have problematized the very notion of a single Hindu religion or community.<sup>4</sup> Second, the Hinduism that Hindu nationalists draw on, Biswas argues, is a particularistic Brahminical (Brahmins form the highest caste group) Hinduism—that is itself a modern development—maintained through the caste hierarchy. Although advocates of this Brahminical construction claim that it is traditional, it is, Thapar argues, a distinctly

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Biswas, Thapar argues that “it was Orientalist scholarship that attempted to reconstruct the various parallel systems, practices and religious beliefs that existed in India into a coherent and rational faith called Hinduism, imagined from the familiar perspective of Semitic religions”—a point that seems consistent with Asad’s argument about the effect of the distinctly Christian structure of religion in contemporary society.

modern phenomenon. Therefore, it is not only the characterization of Indian identity that is deeply ideological; it is the characterization of the Hindu community itself, as an organic and coherent whole, that needs to be problematized.

Finally, I turn to the use of the idea of *Swadeshi* (from one's own country), a term often mobilized by Hindu nationalists. Mahatma Gandhi first popularized the term during the Indian struggle for Independence, urging Indians to boycott foreign goods as a form of protest. Within the contemporary context, *Swadeshi* has come to mean economic nationalism and self-reliance. It is an important concept to understand within the Hindu nationalist context because, according to Biswas, "within the generally enthusiastic acceptance of liberalizing initiatives by the BJP government, the theme of *Swadeshi* functions to resolve the many contradictions and tensions between tradition and modernity that are the hallmark of globalization in postcolonial settings" (119). Biswas argues that within the Hindu nationalist value system, a commitment to nationalism has often found itself in direct conflict with BJP's pro-liberalization policies<sup>5</sup>. The BJP, according to Biswas, has circumvented the problem through the idea of *Swadeshi* and by emphasizing a distinction between internal and external liberalization. According to Biswas, internal liberalization policy "refers to the dismantling of the bureaucratic apparatus and the rules and regulations inhibiting private industry in India" whereas external liberalization "refers to the opening of the Indian market to MNCs and foreign investors" (124-125). This distinction is slightly less clear than one might imagine at first; much of the domestic liberalization supported by the BJP has been to attract foreign

---

<sup>5</sup> Similar to early protestant skepticism about profit-making highlighted by Weber.

investment. In fact, since 1991, Biswas argues, the BJP has not opposed external liberalization in any substantial way. However, by continuing their rhetorical emphasis on Swadeshi, the BJP has been able to maintain the ideological façade of nationalism in the face of its blatantly contradictory neoliberal economic policies. A current example is the Make In India campaign that I will discuss as a part of my contemporary example. Biswas goes as far as to refer to Swadeshi as a “smokescreen rather than a platform” that “helps define the anti-imperialist position, which strikes a chord even with those otherwise opposed to the BJP communalist politics” (127). In this way, the idea of Swadeshi is important because it demonstrates how Hindu nationalist ideology appeals to postcolonial sentiments. This is also another important example of how the two-prongs of the BJP ideology—nationalism and neoliberalism—are codependent and necessary in the ideological masking of the class struggle at the core of contemporary, capitalist Indian society.

In this section, I have argued that both religious nationalism and neoliberal economic policies have been central to the BJP ideology. Since the Rath Yatra and Mandal commission of 1990 however, the popularity of the BJP has skyrocketed. Through the contemporary example of the BJP response to the Jawaharlal Nehru protests of 2016 and the Make in India campaign, I seek to demonstrate how neoliberalism and religious nationalism are still the two forces at the heart of the BJP ideology. I argue that the two cases must be understood in relation to each other and that through events like the protests at JNU, the BJP is able to foster the nationalist sentiments it requires to bolster its neoliberal program like the Make in India campaign.



*JNU and Make in India*

On Wednesday, the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi organized a performance art session and poetry reading to protest the hanging of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri, who was sentenced to death by the Indian Supreme Court in 2013. The protest action sparked a conflict between student groups, the police and the government, that has continued to receive widespread attention across the country. Afzal Guru was hanged for his alleged involvement in an attack on the Indian parliament in 2001. Arundhati Roy, one of India's most famous political activists and novelists, wrote an article in *The Guardian* in 2013, highlighting, what she saw as "gaping holes" in the case against Guru (Roy). In particular, Roy stressed that Guru was tried by the media ahead of his actual Supreme Court hearing and paraded as a representation of anti-nationalism by the BJP—despite a major lack of evidence against him. In fact, the Supreme Court, in their justification for their ruling, alluded to the role of nationalism in their decision, saying "the incident, which resulted in heavy casualties, had shaken the entire nation, and the collective conscience of society will only be satisfied if capital punishment is awarded to the offender" (Roy).

While the sentence itself received a great deal of attention in 2013, the conflict following the protests in February of 2016 have been far more dramatic and have captured the attention of the entire country. Although the conflict already relates to a number of sensitive national issues —Kashmir, national identity and Islam—I argue, as many others have, that Hindu nationalism and the BJP government have played a crucial role in the escalation of the situation. With the help of Thomas Crowley's article 'Modi's

Student Crackdown' in *Jacobin* magazine, I highlight how the incident—and in particular the Hindu nationalist response to the incident—is symptomatic of the Hindu nationalist ideology that I have described in the paper. In particular, I focus on how, in a way that is reminiscent of Laclau's ideological chains of equivalence, the BJP conflate Hinduism and Indian identity while otherizing Islamic identity in the pathological way described in the previous section. I argue that the incident, when understood in relation to the Make in India campaign, is symptomatic of the BJP's ideology of Hindu nationalism and neoliberal economics.

The Kashmir region in the north of India has been controversial since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. India never honored its promise to allow the people of Kashmir to decide which country they wanted to be a part of, and have used the military to enforce a brutal occupation ever since. As a result, a Pakistan-backed insurgency has emerged and caused Kashmir to become an issue of national importance and a site of Hindu-Muslim conflict. Therefore, a protest in support of a Kashmiri separatist was already an ideal issue for Hindu nationalists to exploit.

While the circumstances surrounding the JNU protest are still disputed, the conflict seems to have begun when members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)—the student wing of the RSS—got involved. The ABVP students were offended by the Afzal Guru event and surrounded the protestors, shouting slogans accusing them of anti-nationalism. The leader of the student Union, Kanhaiya Kumar, was arrested and charged with sedition under an archaic colonial-era law. It has since come to light that the evidence used to detain him, a video in which a protestor allegedly shouts

“long live Pakistan!”—that was played hundreds of times by most of the major Indian news channels—was doctored (Indian Express). Similarly, important BJP officials, most notably cabinet minister Rajnath Singh, have come out in support of the ABVP action against the JNU students and gone as far as to claim that the protest was backed by the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamic terrorist organization. Singh cited a tweet as evidence to corroborate his claim, which turned out to be from a parody Twitter account. These are just a few of the many ways in which the BJP, ABVP and their leadership have attempted to present the JNU protestors as anti-national. The association of the protests with Islam and in turn with terrorism and anti-nationalism is an example of the way the pathological otherizing of the Muslim community by Hindu nationalists allows them to repress any internal division.

Regardless of the lack of evidence supporting any of the claims of the nationalists, an invocation of nationalism has allowed the BJP to garner widespread support. Furthermore, this representation of the Hindu nationalist message as the true nationalist message can be understood in terms of Laclau’s theory of hegemony. Not only is the idea of a single Indian identity mobilized to represent a distinctly political message, it is used to construct the anti-national, terrorist Muslim other. As Laclau might put it, there is no Indian identity as such; ideology emerges from the discursive battle for hegemony over the idea of an Indian identity.

Furthermore, all the repressive arms of the state have been heavily involved in the presentation of the JNU protests as anti-national. First, the media; besides playing the doctored videos of protestors a number of times, many news channels, for a period of

time, focused their attention on a student named Umar Khalid, a self-identifying atheist and communist who, according to Crowley, was “known on campus for his rousing speeches” (Crowley). Khalid was falsely accused of being a jihadist—presumably because of his Muslim name—and some news channels went as far as to claim that he had connections to Pakistani terrorist organizations.

Second, the police were called to the scene by the ABVP students and proceeded to arrest—quite strategically—many of the most politically involved students on campus, regardless of their involvement with the Afzal Guru event. According to Crowley, the top Delhi police officers are notorious for the collusion with senior BJP officials and were instrumental in the police action taken against the JNU students. Shockingly, police officers even stood by and watched as Kumar, the head of the student Union, was beaten up along with a sympathetic journalist outside of the High Court on his way to his bail hearing.

Having highlighted how the Hindu nationalists, through their influential role in government, were able to escalate the situation at JNU, it is important to consider how this relates to the neoliberal policies of the BJP. In his article, Crowley himself recognizes the two main emphases on of the BJP government when he says:

The BJP relies on an odd coalition of big capital (the main funders) and religious conservatives (the mass base). As the BJP has failed economically, with the national economy increasingly overwhelmed by international forces, it has put more and more weight on its agenda of cultural, religious nationalism. (Crowley)

While I agree with Crowley's assertion, I argue, as I have in the previous section, that the coalition between big capital and religious conservatives is not odd and in fact exemplifies the BJP ideology. I use Crowley's own example of the Make in India campaign to demonstrate this point.

The "Make in India" campaign is the Modi government's initiative to improve the manufacturing sector in India. The advertising for the campaign—that can be found across the world—promises that it will create jobs but also "spark a renewed sense of pride in Indian manufacturing". It is also important to mention that the flyers handed out at one of the Make in India events were full of images and references to the glorious past of ancient India. This is the first example of how nationalist sentiments are used to garner support for economic policies and campaigns.<sup>6</sup> In this case, this sort of advertising allows the BJP to paper over the fact that the policies of the Make in India campaign are anti-labor, anti agrarian—in a country where a majority of the population works in the agricultural sector—and pro-capital. Professor Sunalini Kumar of Delhi University goes as far as to claim that the Make in India campaign "represents a significant worsening of the economic marginalization of the poor and the vulnerable—both if it succeeds, and if it doesn't" (Kumar).

While Crowley seems to suggest that the events surrounding the JNU protests have been an opportunity to distract from the failures of economic policies such as the Make in India campaign, I believe that he underestimates the codependence of the neoliberal policies and religious nationalism. The JNU protests and the Make in India

---

<sup>6</sup> Crowley points out how this material never mentions the success of the country under Muslim rule—for example, the extremely affluent Mughal period of India's history.

campaign are, I argue, a clear example of how the emphasis on a Hindu nationalist identity and neoliberal economic policies continue to be at the very heart of the BJP belief system. In fact, I claim that if it were not for incidents like the protest at JNU, that stir nationalist sentiments and further allow the Hindu nationalists to exercise discursive hegemony over the idea of Indian identity, there would be little faith in neoliberal campaigns, with obviously nationalist names, like Make in India.

## VI. Conclusion

Through this paper, I have attempted to explicate the ideological role of Hindu nationalism in contemporary Indian society. I have argued that any critique of Hindu nationalism, that treats it as an exclusively political phenomenon that can be neatly separated from the “true” Hindu faith, mistakenly presupposes the existence of religion as a stable transhistorical category. Therefore, I have argued that Hindu nationalism must be understood as a distinctly modern phenomenon that should be, as Asad or Toscano might put it, understood in relation to the material conditions under which it has emerged. Consequently, I have argued that the BJP must not simply be understood as a political actor that has capitalized on the “the social dislocations caused by modernization and globalization” as argued by Biswas; instead, I argue, it should also be understood as a religious phenomenon that has emerged as a symptom of modernity itself.

Most importantly, however, I have argued that as a result of the construction of religion in contemporary society on the model of modern Christianity, Hindu nationalism has begun to perform an ideological role similar to that of Protestant Christianity at the advent of capitalism. Furthermore, through the examples of the JNU protests and Make In India Campaign, I have attempted to show how this ideology functions through joining religious nationalism and neoliberalism in contemporary Indian society.

Finally, I argue that ideology critique must not claim to operate from some extra-discursive vantage point. Instead, following Žižek’s Lacanian framework, I argue that ideology must be understood as spectre that masks the class antagonism at the very heart of secular capitalist modernity. Therefore, I argue that most critiques of Hindu

nationalism have been insufficient insofar as they have neglected to understand its structural emergence as an ideological phenomenon. In fact, I would go as far as to argue that any attempt to explain the rise of the BJP and Hindu nationalism that neglects to evaluate its structural emergence and ideological function—calling it an elite conspiracy, mass movement or both—must also be considered deeply ideological. Such a critique would also cover up the antagonism at the very heart of modern capitalist Indian society in favor of some more historically contingent explanation.

That being said, I stand by the claim that the structural emergence of Hindu nationalism can and must be understood in relation to the historical circumstances in which it emerges. Any critique of the various ideological mechanisms it employs would be significantly deepened by a close analysis of a wider variety of historical texts; for example, speeches by Prime Minister Modi himself or BJP government contracts with multinational corporations—something that is beyond the scope of this project. I hope that the theoretical work done in this project will incentivize scholars to pursue more serious historical work on Hindu nationalism that attempts to better understand its ideological function in contemporary Indian society.



## Works Cited

- Ahmad, Irfan "Are India's Muslims A Minority." *Al Jazeera* 5 June 2014. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Ed. Louis Althusser. London: NLB, 1971. 121-173. Print.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies Of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power In Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Print.
- Balibar, Étienne. *The philosophy of Marx*. London New York: Verso, 1995. Print.
- Basu, Amrita. "Mass Movement Or Elite Conspiracy?" *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and The Politics of Democracy in India*. Ed. David Ludden. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. 55-80. Print.
- Bhagwat, Mohan. "Vijayadashami Speech." Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Rashimbagh Maidan, Nagpur. 3 Oct. 2014. NDTV.com. *NDTV*, 3 Oct. 2014. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.
- Biswas, Shampa. "To Be Modern, but in the 'Indian' Way: Hindu Nationalism." *Gods, Guns, and Globalization: Religious Radicalism and International Political Economy*. Ed. Robert Denemark & Maryann Tetrault. Boulder: Reinner Publishers, 2004. 107-128. Print.
- Chakraborty, Aditya. "Narendra Modi, A Man With A Massacre On His Hands, Is Not The Reasonable Choice For India." *The Guardian* 7 April 2014. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.

Crowley, Thomas. "Modi's Student Crackdown" *Jacobin Magazine*. 2 March. 2016.

Web. 4 April 2016.

Foucault, Michel. *The birth of Biopolitics: Lectures At The Collège de France, 1978-79*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Gauthum, Leila. "Make in India—A Critical Examination Of An Economic

Strategy." *Kafila.org*. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.

Jaitley, Arun. "Budget 2014-2015." Lok Sabha. Parliament House, New Delhi. 10 July

2014. Thehindu.com. *The Hindu*, 10 July 2014. Web. 4 Apr. 2016

"JNU Row: Delhi Govt To File Cases Against TV Channels Over

'Doctored' Videos." *The Indian Express* 8 March 2016. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.

Kalbag, Chaitanya "A Dangerous Line Was Crossed When Doordarshan Telecast

Bhagwat's Speech Live." *Quartz India*. 3 October 2014: Qz.com. Web. 20 March 2015.

Laclau, Ernesto. "The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology." *MLN* 112.3

(1997): 297-321. Print.

Laine, James. "Resisting My Attackers; Resisting My Defends." *Engaging South Asian*

*Religions Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*. Ed. Matthew Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. 153-171. Print.

Marx, Karl. "On Imperialism In India." *The Marx-Engles Reader*. Ed. Robert Tucker.

New York: Norton, 1978. 653-664. Print.

"Mission." *RSS.org*. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang. Web. 4 April 2016.

Nandy, Ashis. *Time Warps: Silent And Evasive Pasts In Indian Politics And Religion*.

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002. Print.

Nandy, Ashis. "Hinduism Versus Hindutva: The Inevitability Of A Confrontation." *The*

*Times of India* 18 February 1991. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.

Roy, Arundhati. "The Hanging Of Afzal Guru Is A Stain On India's Democracy." *The*

*Guardian* 10 February 2013. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.

Toscano, Alberto. "Beyond Abstraction: Marx and the Critique of the Critique of

Religion." *Historical Materialism*. 18.1 (2010): 3-29. Print.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic And The Spirit Of Capitalism*. London New York:

Routledge, 2001. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*. New

York: Verso, 2005. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Objet a In Social Links." *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of*

*Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Justin Clemens & Russell Grigg. Durham: Duke University

Press, 2006. 107-128. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Spectre of Ideology." *Mapping Ideology*. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. New

York: Verso, 1994. 1-33. Print.

