

## BOOK REVIEW

### Saffron Republic: Hindu Nationalism and State Power in India

Thomas Blom Hansen & Srirupa Roy (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 330

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## **Saffron Republic: Hindu Nationalism and State Power in India**

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“Saffron Republic: Hindu Nationalism and State Power in India,” edited by Thomas Blom Hansen and Srirupa Roy, explores the phenomenon and evolution of the “New Hindutva” practiced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after assuming power in India in 2014.

The book traces the evolution of Hindu nationalism from a movement characterized by mass mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s to a well-rounded political ideology, focusing on transforming India’s cultural and religious identity and foreign and economic policies. As Hindu nationalism becomes prevalently ubiquitous in statecraft and governance, this collection of essays examines how Hindutva has become deeply rooted in the socio-political foundations of India, to the extent that the once stark dichotomy between secular Indian democracy and Hindu nationalism has disappeared. This volume describes contemporary Hindutva as democratic authoritarianism or authoritarian populism.

The book’s foundation is laid on four broad themes – Rule, Articulation, Inclusion, and Violence – which weave together the rise of the new Hindutva. The first section on “Rule” outlines how the BJP, under the watchful eye of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has dominated the Indian political landscape. It adopted a careful strategy of weaponized parliamentary

procedures, such as bypassing legislation through ordinances, unrelenting intimidation of media, and crackdowns on human rights organizations and activists. This meticulously crafted strategy solidified its control over the state apparatus.

The book opens with a detailed timeline outlining the critical events that have taken place since the BJP assumed power in 2014. Amrita Basu sheds light on the intricate alliance of the state, political parties, and civil society that has garnered immense power, operating as a parallel structure and fostering an environment marred with fear and intimidation. This network has normalized state-sanctioned violence, further augmented by the dissemination of Hindutva ideas through “right-wing think tanks,” as discussed by Srirupa Roy in the subsequent chapter. She outlines how these think tanks play a crucial role in enabling and normalizing the heinous violence carried out at the behest of the government by providing a platform to RSS sympathizers.

The next chapter offers a first-hand account of life under the new Hindutva in Uttar Pradesh through the lens of filmmaker Nakul Sawhney and journalist Neha Dixit. They reveal in their interviews how anti-minority violence has been legitimized under the rule of Yogi Adityanath. This chapter delves deeper into the draconian measures adopted by the government, such as violent raids and mass arrests, to intimidate minorities and instill fear in them to establish the writ of the state.

The second section on “Articulation” explores the transformation of Hindu nationalism from a shared value among the upper caste and middle-class population of certain Indian regions to a powerful force driving the BJP’s electoral success. The first two chapters argue that Hindutva should not be examined as a standalone phenomenon. Its relationship should be examined concerning India’s democratic past and present. Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay draws on this argument to show how the mass migration of Hindus after 1947 and subsequent normalized

violence against Muslims in 1946 in Calcutta – a Hindu-majority city in a Muslim-majority province – created deep segregation along community lines.

Thomas Hansen explores how physical segregation and segmentation of livelihood opportunities in Aurangabad led to unequal labor markets and diminishing work opportunities for Muslims. By addressing these aspects, this book section encourages a nuanced understanding of the social, political, and economic factors paving the way for Hindutva to emerge as the dominant ideology.

The third section on “Inclusion” highlights the evolving inclusion policy in the new Hindutva strategy. The ideology has departed from its narrow focus on just Hindus and has embraced diverse communities previously excluded from its fold. Arkotong Longkumer argues that as Hindutva enters the discourse of indigeneity, it legitimizes its ideology as the ultimate way of life.

In the later chapter, Sryakant Waghmore delves deep into the use of RSS-sponsored educational organizations (Tapas) whose beneficiaries are children from different backgrounds. He writes that Tapas aim to transcend caste hierarchies and create a system where RSS leaders are projected as national heroes. By displaying a sense of national unity, they aim to lay the foundation for representing RSS leaders as promoters of social cohesion in India. Lalit Vachani looks into the role of the Muslim Rashtriya Manch (MRM) in providing a platform for pro-Hindutva Muslims to endorse the Hindutva ideology and their goal of creating an India solely for Hindus. He further notes that since the general Muslim population is not the target audience of this group, it raises questions about its inclusivity.

The last section on “Violence” opens with Irfan Ahmed’s chapter exploring how pogroms extend beyond partisan politics and are carried under the banner of nationalism. He supports the argument by citing the examples of the Delhi and Bhagalpur

pogroms, which were carried out under the BJP and Congress governments, respectively. In her chapter, Mona Bhan argues that India's development is a myth that has been used repeatedly to legitimize its changing politics and identity as a nation. She explores how Kashmir has been at the center of this legitimization, first its secular credentials and now its identity as a Hindu state.

The concluding chapter by Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi provides introspection into the avoidance of political discourse in Gujarat due to the internalized guilt of the locals regarding the Gujarat massacre. The section sheds light on diverse perspectives on violence in India and its effect on its political landscape.

This book is engaging as it departs from traditional commentary on Hindutva politics due to its unique perspective. The authors' well-informed arguments, divided into different sections, knit together the rise of the New Hindutva, carefully laying out how it differs from its previous version, supplemented by factual analysis. The variety of writing styles is another incentive for an avid reader, along with new perspectives, such as the interviews of a filmmaker and a journalist, which is uncommon in books of this kind. The argument that socio-economic segmentation facilitated through old democratic policies in India has facilitated the rise of Hindu nationalism is well-articulated. The book combines diverse analyses of new Hindutva politics, making it a must-read for anyone interested in the dynamics of Hindutva and Indian politics.

***Reviewed by Fatima Azhar, a graduate in International Relations from the National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad.***