

*Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*. By Jyotirmaya Sharma. (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2015. 240 pp. ISBN 978-93-5177-397-9).

In 2003 Jyotirmaya Sharma first published *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*. He intended to trace a genealogy of Hindu identity and to analyse the idea that Hindu nationalism and Hindu identity in India can become indistinguishable. *Hindutva* is predicated on an assumed consensus about what constitutes Hindu identity and differentiates it from the ways of life and values of “others,” especially Muslims. The reviews on Sharma’s book coincided in pointing out his shortened but rigorous exploration of Hindu nationalism in the recent past, but also the fact that the book had obvious flaws. These Sharma acknowledged and tried to offset in this second edition. The book has now a new and clearer introduction where he outlines the main ideas that formed the right-wing ideological basis of this nationalist movement. Then, in his attempt to discover the roots of *Hindutva*, he studies the works of four major figures of the late 19th- and early 20th century of Hindu revivalist movement: Dayananda Saraswati, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.

Despite his different approaches to these four personalities, Sharma selects them for a common agenda. They managed to have Hinduism interpreted and morphed into a rigid, codified, monochromatic all-encompassing ideology; definitely its masculinist, aggressive discourse was crucial to establishing its supremacy over other religions.

His essay begins with an analysis of Dayananda Saraswati’s interpretation of the Vedas. Sharma traces back to the early 19th century an attempt to culturally homogenise India, which was corrupted by divergence. Accordingly, all other religions practiced in India, and particularly, Islam, must be considered inferior compared to the Vedic faith. With the British involvement in India from the 18th century and the later direct rule by the British Crown, the Hindu-Muslim conflict was deferred in the presence of a common enemy. This idea is further explored by Sri Aurobindo who, taking part of the Indian movement for independence, supported the union of Indians

regardless of their faith to regain freedom from the British. Brotherhood was necessary—but they should keep in mind that the nation will always have the Hindu spirit, despite Muslims fighting along. Here, Sharma ascertains that the relationship between politics and spirituality begins to merge. With regard to the third chapter on Swami Vivekananda, the author points out that the former lived during a period when India needed a spiritual and nationalist awakening as seen in the Bengali Renaissance. Vivekananda’s aim to regenerate Hinduism was complemented with an agenda for social transformation that eventually would guide his people into achieving freedom. The last essay in the book focuses, finally, on the militant Hindu nationalist who coined the term *Hindutva*, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. For him, the only effective way to obtain and keep political freedom is bound to a common, articulated, and assertive nationalist banner. That is the central tenet of his foundational book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). His postulates hold a central role in the vote bank loyal to BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and RSS, (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), quest of supremacist Bharat.

There is definitely exploration but no discussion, unfortunately. I assume that, in an attempt to stick to an objective analysis, the author refrained from giving an opinion of his own to inform the prospective readers. Far from encouraging a debate, this could make them feel disoriented. The book does not provide enough socio-cultural background of 19th century India; nor does it even mention how *Hindutva* foundational texts were received—which would have further clarified the motivation and their arguments. I do agree that this book is based on deep reading, research and academic experience, but the reader not familiarised with the topic should seek previous background readings before approaching Sharma’s. This notwithstanding, it still may be a required further reading for students of Indian history, culture and politics, especially in these times of emerging right-wing populism, nationalism and Islamophobia in India and elsewhere.

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