



SciencesPo.

CERI
CNRS

Projet de recherche supporté financièrement
par la direction scientifique de Sciences Po

Hindu Nationalism and Violence

Project conducted by [Christophe Jaffrelot](#), Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Malvika Maheshwari (post-doctoral student, CERI-Sciences Po)

Project description

India witnesses an unprecedented rise in militant Hinduism since the late 1980s and early 1990s. This phenomenon remains a challenging one for social scientists in so far as the essential characteristics of Hinduism scarcely lend themselves to a monolithic radicalism and this religion cultivates an ideal of non-violence.

Based on extensive archival and empirical field works, **this research project will trace the trajectory of Hindu nationalist violence at the macro and the micro levels** by exploring the **invention** and **evolution** of the forms, **justifications** and **methods** of violent Hindu groups **from the 'revolutionaries' of the late 19th century to the 'saffron terror' of the present day India.**

Therefore, the project will investigate four aspects of the phenomenon, following its chronological evolution:

1. «Terro-Hinduism» and Anti-Gandhism under the British Raj
2. Engineered Communal Riots and the RSS Politics of Denial
3. The Routinisation of Violence against Minorities and «Deviant Hindus»
4. Emulating the Islamists: the (Re)Invention of Saffron Terrorism

1 - «Terro-Hinduism» and Anti-Gandhism under the British Raj

From the late 19th century till the end of the First World War, India became a scene of revolutionary movement marked, at the same time, by the cult of violence and the influence of Hindu religion. Its proponents made the anti-colonial struggle a sacred cause for which the use of violence was justified by certain traits and interpretations of Hinduism.

Our research will focus on two streams combining ideological and activist dimensions.

- The first one is closely associated to B.G. Tilak and V.D. Savarkar. Tilak initiated an understudied **«invention of tradition» by finding in one of the most popular sacred books** of Hinduism (The Bhagavad Gita) the **justifications of violence in politics** - a technique Savarkar was among the first to implement.



- The second stream is best exemplified by Aurobindo and a movement called Anushilan Samiti. Here, **violence was legitimised by references to certain currents of Hinduism, Shaktism and Tantrism.**

The overwhelming domination of Gandhism as the only legitimate anti-British brand of politics inhibited the revolutionaries. But the Savarkarites - who formed a militia, the Hindu Rashtra Dal - got organised underground and planned the Mahatma's assassination in 1948.

This history of the violent variety of Hindu nationalism during the British Raj, will be scrutinized on the basis of unexplored sources such as: British intelligence reports, private papers, including Savarkar's and his lieutenants ones.

2. Engineered Communal Riots and the RSS Politics of Denial

After independence, the Savarkarites were marginalised because the murder of Gandhi. The movement which started to dominate the Hindu nationalist arena, **the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) claimed that it did not believe in violence** and developed an alternative *modus operandi* relying on **persuasion and intimidation of the Muslims** (their primary target) **and the «deviant» Hindus.**

Certainly, **the RSS believed more in quietist methods than violence. But it does not mean that it did not value this form of action in certain circumstances.** This is an unexplored subject on which this project will focus in its the post-independence part.

The increasingly tense in the Hindu-Muslim relations from the 1960s onwards was largely due to the **provocations of the RSS.** Gradually, this communal violence was engineered by the Jana Sangh (the RSS-supported political party) which intended to draw electoral dividend from the **polarisation of the voters along communal lines.**

This aspect of the project will be based on open sources (including the reports of the commissions of inquiry which have been appointed after each riot in the 1960s and 1970s) and interviews of actors.

3. The Routinisation of Violence against Minorities and «Deviant Hindus»

The 1980s marked a watershed in the forms, forces and motivations of Hindu nationalist violence in India leading to its 'routinisation'. The third part of the work will analyze this phenomenon through a tripartite, in-depth understanding of the violent offenders, their victims and the role of the state.

We'll focus first on **the Bajrang Dal, a militia linked to the RSS which spearheaded the Sangh's violence against minority communities.** The Bajrang Dal took an active part in **the demolition, in 1992, of the mosque Babri Masjid,** a situated near a new Hindu temple. It has, since then, assumed the role of a 'cultural police' by attacking 'deviant' artists, inter religious married couples etc.

Our study of the Bajrang Dal, an understudied organisation, will rely mostly on field work since scholarly research on the subject is almost non-existent.

The second subject of this part will be the forms of **anti-Christian violence.** Christians, like Muslims, have been traditional targets of the RSS. For this organisation **they represent a foreign religion** and are supposed to pay allegiance to the Pope. This



opposition remained circumscribed to some states till the 1990s. Since then, it has expanded to states where Hindu nationalist organisations mobilised against conversions. We'll use Orissa as a case study, not only because this phenomenon acquired the largest proportions in this state, but also because it relates there to the tribal issue (Christians are mainly Tribals) and the maoist guerilla - which defends the Christian Tribals.

The third section of this part will deal with the **2002 state-sponsored pogrom in Gujarat**. This unprecedented wave of anti-Muslim violence in independent India (about 2000 people, including hundreds of children, died) shows how the rise to power of the BJP, the RSS-supported party, has affected the functioning of the bureaucracy and the police.

The Orissa and Gujarat case studies will be based on field work.

4. Emulating the Islamists: the (Re)Invention of Saffron Terrorism

Some Hindu nationalists, usually associated with the RSS, have created or joined **new militias** whose main aim was to take revenge on Indian Muslims for past acts of terrorism.

The Hindu militias at stake resorted to violent action to resist islamist groups by emulating their *modus operandi* based on bomb blasts.

The involvement of Hindu nationalists in terrorist activities is of consequence for the nation's internal security and for the Sangh Parivar itself. **So far, the RSS did not believe in the Savarkarite violent techniques**, preferring invest in a long term strategy of identifying India with the majoritarian religion. **But, recently, some of its senior leaders have covertly indulged in forms of terrorist violence.**

In addition to the militias which have been responsible for terrorist actions, we'll study the **investigations into these acts of terrorism and their judicial consequences**. The police, the Indian judiciary and its assisting agencies have often been too quick to implicate the wrong men as guilty - mostly Muslims. This miscarriage of justice seems to reflect some deep rooted prejudice and the growing ideology of Hindu majoritarianism.

This last part of the project will rely on primary sources including interviews and First Information Reports which are sometimes very rich. The Malegaon case one includes the transcripts of the meetings the members of Abhinav Bharat have recorded in a systematic manner, for instance.

Aims

This project has two different objectives:

1) **To narrate a story that has not been written yet by highlighting its «in mirror» dimension**

The way the Hindu nationalists relate to violence has been unexplored and minimised by the actors because they look at this «method» as more or less illegitimate. Not only Gandhi has deligitimised violence as a political tool in India, but Hindu nationalists tend to be ambivalent about: while some of them find good religious reasons to resort to violence, most of them claim that Hindus cannot be violent and that they are victims of others.



The history of the relations between the Hindu nationalists and violence has followed a very specific course. Each stage took shape not only in reaction, but also in mirror to what they interpreted as an external aggression.

The Hindu nationalist relation to violence is not only derivative because of its nemesis character but also because it often tried **to replicate past «achievements»**. For instance the main architect of «Saffron terror» during the last decade named itself after the organisation Savarkar had created in 1905, Abhinav Bharat.

2) To highlight an under studied aspect of the crisis of Indian secularism

This crisis has mostly been analysed in relation to the decline of Indian multiculturalism and the correlative rise of Hindu majoritarianism in the electoral arena. The assertiveness of a violent form of Hindu nationalism reflects **another dimension of this phenomenon: the “corruption” of the state machinery.**

First, the growing influence of movements like the Bajrang Dal and the Shiv Sena have resulted in the **making of parallel governments at the local level**. These parallel governments resort to muscle power and intimidation to rule over underprivileged groups (Muslims, Tribals, slum dwellers...)

Second, states where the BJP is in office use **violence as a technique of domination over the minorities and political communication**. Gujarat is a case in point. The BJP and other offshoots of the RSS have fought against minorities. Hence fake encounters with Muslims who were presented as terrorist targeting the Chief Minister, Narendra Modi.

Third, the key institution of India's democracy, that is **the judiciary, is affected by new forms of communal bias** - and this is evident from the judicial consequences of the Hindu nationalist forms of violence. The trials organised against the Bajrang Dal cadres who have taken part in the Gujarat pogrom or in violence in Orissa are few. Most of the culprits are on bail or have been acquitted. Similarly, the blasts which have aimed at mosques or *dargahs* have often been attributed by the police at Muslims. Many of them have been sent to jail - and have stayed there even when the investigations eventually led to Hindu terrorist groups.

Methodology

The study will be based on crucial primary sources and in depth and lengthy field research in India. A diverse range of sources will be considered essential, which includes interview based, document based and observation-based methods. The archival and interview based research would be conducted in various states of India including Gujarat, Orissa, Maharashtra and Delhi. Along with interviewing politicians, Hindu nationalist activists, victims and adversaries, the work entails a study of numerous reports, FIRs, charge sheets and legal documents used and produced by the various investigative, governmental agencies.