Article
Orientalism’s Hinduism, Orientalism’s Islam, and the Twilight of the Subcontinental Imagination
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Abstract: Using the figure of the ethnic Pathan/Pashtun as a trope in South Asian culture, this essay provides a genealogical account of the modern emergence of Hindu–Muslim “religious” conflicts played along the lines of nation-thinking in the Indian subcontinent. This modern phenomenon begins in the late 18th century, with the orientalist transcriptions of a vast conglomerate of diverse Indic faiths into a Brahminical–Sanskritic Hinduism and a similar telescoping of complex Islamic intellectual traditions into what we can call a “Mohammedanism” overdetermined by Islamic law. As such, both these transcriptions had to fulfill certain Christological expectations of western anthropology in order to emerge as “religions” and “world religions”, that is, when, as Talal Asad has shown, “religion” was constructed as an anthropological category within the parameters of European secular introspection and the modern expansion of empire. Both Hinduism and Islam therefore had to have a book, a prophetic figure, a doctrinal core, and a singular compendium of laws. Upper caste Sanskritic traditions therefore dominated Hinduism, and a legal supremacism position dominated the modern reckoning of Islam at the expense of philosophy, metaphysics, poesis, and varieties of artistic self-making. Together, the two phenomena also created the historical illusion (now industrialized) that Brahminism always defined Hindu societies and the Sharia was always a total fact of Islam.

Keywords: Hindutva; Islamicist fundamentalism; religious nationalism; Hindu nationalism; Bollywood; secularism; fascism; Indian politics; political theology; political monotheism

1. Introduction

Toward the end of January 2023, the Indian film Pathaan (Anand 2023) was released in theaters worldwide with great fanfare, as well as with strident calls for boycott from certain Hindutva quarters. The attack of the culturalist brigade was prompted by a saffron swimsuit worn by Deepika Padukone, the film’s lead female actor, allegedly to hurt Hindu sentiments. Earlier, Shahrukh Khan, the film’s star attraction, had been vilified for expressing concern about the increasingly vitiated communal atmosphere in India. But in the middle of the storm, Sudhir Chaudhury, an anchor in the Indian news portal Aaj Tak, asked a much more elemental question in his personal YouTube channel: “Why Pathan? Why not Pundit?” Chaudhury, of course, is one of an entire set of brazenly communal news anchors in an overall Indian right-wing news-infotainment ecology I have called Hindutva 2.0. Among other things, he had distinguished himself in the past by attributing the spread of COVID-19 in India to a Muslim “Corona Jihad”. Nevertheless, I find his question useful as a tool of navigation in the exploratory schema of this essay because Chaudhury is appealing to an electrified caste Hindu commonsense of our times. I would like to use this as a ruse to occasion a discussion about Hindutva and the purportedly secular Indian modernity project around the figure of the Muslim Pathan.

Pathan/Pashtuns are Pashto-speaking people originally hailing from the southern and eastern edges of present-day Afghanistan and the western and northern parts of Pakistan. They are predominantly Sunni Muslims with Shia and Sufi minorities, but not all of the almost 50 million strong global diasporas follow Islam. There is a small number of
Hindu and Sikh Pathans as well, especially in India where they arrived and settled after the Partition and also recently, after being displaced by the Taliban. According to a 2018 estimate by All India Pakhtoon Jigra-e-Hind, at that point, there were over 3.2 million Pathan people residing in India since independence, with around 21,000 Pashto speakers. This particular community, despite promises, has been denied Indian citizenship. They only hold permits to live on small trade and moneylending. At present, the task of the Jigra is to draw international attention to periodic atrocities on Pashtuns inflicted by governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan and keep alive the demand for a separate and independent Pakhtunistan carved out of both these countries.

But that apart, deep histories of trade, migration, and settlement in the subcontinent have left distinct linguistic, musical, culinary, sartorial, and other cultural imprints of the Pathan in Indian life. There have been a plethora of prominent Indian artists, poets and litterateurs, musicians, sportspersons, politicians, and intellectuals with Pashtun lineages. The Pathan male has been a persistent figure in culture, from the migrant fruit seller and money lender in Rabindranath Tagore’s classic 1892 short story Kabuliwala to popular films like Zanjeer (Mehra 1973) or Khuda Gawah (Anand 1992). Until recently, he came across as an endearing anthropological stereotype: big, burly, temperamental, prone to violence, unapologetically tribal in terms of bearings and code of honor, and a bit of a simpleton who can either be a fierce enemy or a loyal friend to the death.

Sudhir Chaudhury’s rhetorical query points to a contemporary India that is seemingly no longer very welcoming toward the Pathan. This has been only too apparent in the Modi government’s recent efforts pertaining to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act, passed on 12 December 2019. As far as the Pathan is concerned, the act extends hospitality and eventual Indian citizenship to Hindu or Sikh ones from Afghanistan or Pakistan who fled to escape religious persecution before 2014 but not to Muslims, even though they might be minority Shias, Sufis, Hazaras, Nizari Ismailis, or Ahmadiyyas. The current ascendency of muscular Hindutva is a moment in which Indians are being asked to drop their constitutional pretenses and accept an essentially majoritarian Indian modernity that, at the end of the day, can define itself only through a differential exclusion of the Muslim. Recent Hindutva discourse has been focused on calling out liberal hypocrisy and denial and on exhibiting this “dirty secret” in broad daylight. As far as constitutional pieties go, the task of Hindutva has been either to announce the “secular” as a false veneer that hides the true national essence or to declare “secular” and “Hindu” to be synonymous. Generally, moderate and hard Hindutva speak has wavered between two poles of extremity. There have been invitations to “good” Muslims, “good” Dalits, and other minorities to submit to a principled Brahminical paternalism and a Savarna (upper caste) custodianship of culture. On the other hand, there have been calls for a genocide of Indian Muslims.

Chaudhury of course deliberately mixes up his categories; Pathan is an ethnic figure, while Pundit is a caste Hindu religious identity. I would like to explore this historical tension between race, ethnicity, and religion in Hindutva discourse by conducting a thought experiment around the figure of the Pathan. In order to do that, I will first provide a snapshot of Hindutva as territorialized ethics and a modern political monotheism as I have elaborated in a recent book-length study (see Basu 2020). Following that, I will discuss the Bengali polymath and intellectual Syed Mujtaba Ali’s travelogue Deshe Bideshe (Ali 1949) and then contrast the pre-independence historical/anthropological figure of the Pathan in that text with pathologized Afghan figures in revisionist Bollywood historicals of our times. As such, the figuration of the Pathan in that relatively short trajectory compresses several layers of memory and several thresholds of time. It begins with Aryanism and the Mahabharata and continues with Buddhism, the Greek invasion, the Islamic conquest, the Mongol invasions, an entire history of tumult involving the Durrani empire, the British Afghan Wars, and beyond, up to the modern state of Afghanistan and its capitulation to the Taliban. This tracing of the ethno-religious figure from a domain of hospitality to that of pathology and primal war unfolds a narrative arc of the South Asian modernization...
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2. Orientalism’s Hinduism and the Genealogy of Hindutva

2.1. The Orientalist Invention of Hinduism

Despite claiming to be an authentic, indigenous world view, the genealogy of Hindutva shows that it is an ideology almost completely rooted in 19th century Eurocentric ideas of nationhood and orientalist modes of determining and engineering religious identity, culture, political organization, and community. The relatively unique features of Hindu nationalism as a historical formation can be better understood if we view the phenomenon as a political monotheism. In order to do so, one must first look at the epistemological invention of “Hinduism” as a religion by 19th century Indology. Following that, from the second decade of the twentieth century we can trace the evolution of Hindu nationalism as an ongoing monotheematization of that demographic identity as a politico-nationalist one—as Sanatan Dharma which operates as “religion” or, alternatively, as Hindutva, that religion’s ethno-cultural equivalent. Either way, matters converge in the demand for a Hindu Rashtra or a Hindu nation-state.

The idea of political monotheism rests on a generally overlooked feature in modern western nation-thinking: while the nation can be imagined in many registers like language, culture, race, ethnicity, geographical unity, common memories, migration legacies, or anti-imperialist struggle, if the nationalism has to be religious in nature, there is an unstated assumption that the religion in question has to be something like an Abrahamic monotheism or has to provide a secular equivalent of that. This monotheistic imperative is quite consistent in the annals of European political philosophy, both in the continental traditions and among the Anglican social contract theorists. It is there in Hobbes’ tirade against the religion of the Gentiles in the Leviathan, Locke’s heartburn about Papists even with his liberty of conscience, or Hegel’s antipathy toward Jews, Anabaptists, and Quakers despite his Universal. Consider this passage from Book IV, chapter 8 of Rousseau’s Social Contract: “From the mere fact that God was set over every political society, it followed that there were as many gods as peoples. Two peoples that were strangers the one to the other, and almost always enemies, could not recognize the same master; two armies giving battle could not obey the same leader. National divisions thus led to polytheism, and this gave rise to civil intolerance, which...are by nature same” (Rousseau 1993, pp. 298–99). In Rousseau’s perception, therefore, an apparently polytheistic Hinduism can produce a Hindu empire but not an organic Hindu nation.

Religious nationalism, by that logic, has to be ultimately based on a faith with creedal precision and backed by a God like that of Exodus 20, who can be uncompromisingly jealous of false idols and who calls for a categorical separation between the believer and the infidel. Seen from that vantage point, the “oriental solution” would be that for there to be a Hindu nation and a Hindu state, there had to be a Hindu monotheism or an ethnocultural version of that. There had to be an axiomatic Hindu Church and a sense of Hindu laity that could then be politically reinvented as a national fraternité. This was not just a question of affirming faith in any one God but one capable of demanding sacrifice and martyrdom. The religion also had to furnish a strong eschatology and providential destinying, since a people cannot be a people without a common journey toward redemption.

If we can imagine ourselves surveying the landscape of Indic pieties around the final quarter of the 18th century, this would, of course, be a formidable project of “reform” and “modernization” in the longue durée. It would mean subsuming a breathtaking array of Vedic, polytheistic, theistic, pantheistic, henotheistic, atheistic, agnostic, animist, or hylozoistic sects into a singular edifice of faith, that is, not to mention, dozens of syncretic faith formations that freely intersected with Hindu, Islamic, and other traditions. Apart from the six Brahminical Vedic schools of philosophy, historical “Hinduism” was marked by a vast vernacular spread of local legends, idols, popular saints, pilgrimage spots, fertility rituals, funeral rites, and devotional customs to protect from epidemics or natural disasters.
There was, of course, no Church of Hinduism, nor a paramount ecclesiastical authority to separate core dogma from heretical or heterodox beliefs. That apart, the transformation of a Hindu laity to a homogenous political fraternity would be immensely complicated by the fact that this “religion” was not a congregational one. The caste system, gender divisions, and practices of untouchability foreclosed that possibility. If a people were not allowed to enter the same temple, how could they gather in the same political assembly?

However, a Christian–monotheistic framework was historically consistent in the colonial reckoning of a vast conglomerate of Indic faith traditions as a “religion” in the western anthropological sense, that is, in the sense drawn from the Latinate etymological sense of relic—something that binds and relegates. This was a significant shift since, as Bimal Krishna Matilal pointed out, “The social reality [called] religion did not exist in ancient or classical India” (Matilal 2002, p. 23). “Religion”, in the modern sense, as Talal Asad has shown, was constructed as a category within the parameters of European secular introspection after the mid-millennial European wars and the modern expansion of empires. The historical application of this anthropological apparatus in the subcontinent did not create a Hindu monotheism of course but devolved in the long run what can be called a religious axiomatic. The term axiomatic here pertains to a singular religious passion that does not necessarily depend on theological consistency. I partially draw this concept from William Connolly. The axiomatic is not a static theological edifice but “a set of institutional knots with dense tangles and loose ends” that “twists and turns through time as it absorbs the shocks and additions created by previously exogenous forces”. These exogenous forces include mutations in enemy axiomatics like Islam. An imagined Hindu identity was, in that sense, made axiomatic in a new public culture of print throughout the long 19th century. It was bureaucratized and entered the realms of colonial governance, political representation, and eventually nation-thinking with an eye on the state. Later on in the essay, we will glimpse at how orientalism did something similar to produce a monolithic Muslim identity as a competing political monotheism.

The colonial construction of Hinduism as a religion came with a set of Abrahamic expectations. To begin with, the Hindu needed a book. It was with Charles Wilkins’s 1785 English translation of the Bhagwad Gita that the text began its modern Indological career as the Hindu Bible. Earlier, the Warren Hastings administration, circa 1772, had adopted the Manusmriti as the paradigmatic Hindu law, over and above a dozen other Dharmasastras and many fluid eccentricities of local custom and vernacular interpretation. This imperial project of reading India through orientalist dispatches was pioneered by Europeans like William Jones (1746–1794), Nathaniel Halhed (1751–1830), Henry Colebrook (1765–1837), and William Carey (1761–1834) with the help of native intellectuals like Ramram Basu (1751–1813) and Mrintyunjay Vidyalankar (1762–1819). It was carried out in institutions like the College of Fort William, the Asiatic Society, and the Baptist Mission at Srirampore.

This construction of the Hindu religion focused almost exclusively on the Olympian heights of the Brahminical–Sanskrit tradition. Innumerable vernacular cosmologies, heterodox orders like that of the Aghoris, Kabirpanthis, Lingayats, or the Ravidasis, and the antinomian energies of Tantrism or Shaktism were anthropologically relegated as deviations from a spiritual normal, usually full of superstition, vice, and idolatry. Alternatively, popular Bhakti pieties could be accounted for in literary or aesthetic terms, as it was with the dohas of Kabir or the bhajans of Surdas, separating “religion” from that other thing called “culture“. These were to be absorbed into the mainstream understanding as sectarian expressions of a quotidiant and largely unlettered spirituality but not constitutive of a central doctrinal tradition. That is when Hinduism, like all other religions, needed to have a central doctrinal tradition. The egalitarian pressures and critiques of caste built into such antinomian formations were also sidelined in relation to a religious core. Colonial religious anthropology would always tend toward defining Hinduism in terms of a singular ontology and varnasrama dharma as the normative mode of Hindu existence. What began as a marking of colonial difference between Christianity and Hinduism under the indices of
religion, culture, and civilization in the final quarter of the 18th century took a turn toward Aryanism and a biologism of race about half a century later.

The Sanskritist, lexicographer, translator, and ardent evangelical Sir Monier Monier-Williams’s famous 1877 book *Hinduism* accordingly begins with a fundamental determination: “It is remarkable that with all their diversities the Hindu populations throughout India have a religious faith which, preserved as it is in one language and one literature furnishes a good evidence of the original unity of the Indo-Aryan immigrants”. This, in essence, was an “original, simple, pantheistic doctrine but branching out into an endless variety of polytheistic superstitions” (Monier-Williams 1877, pp. 10–11). The apex position of Sanskrit in this schema is inevitable because the language, consciously or unconsciously, gives a “deeper impress to the Hindu mind”. One need not know Latin to understand Italy, since there was modern Italian literature. On the other hand, knowing Sanskrit was essential to know India since “the literature of the Hindu vernacular dialects (except perhaps that of Tamil) is scarcely deserving the name” (Monier-Williams 1877, p. 14).

The narrative that Monier-Williams presents is one of civilizational and racial decline, much in line with Max Muller’s romantic orientalism that had cast the Rg Veda as the original Aryan bible untainted by the Semite. Following the recording of that first Revelation, the Indian branch of the master race had degenerated due to miscegenation and the tropical climate. Monier-Williams’ story begins with a “somewhat nebulous and undefined” monotheistic God invoked in the 121st hymn of the first mandala of the Rg Veda. This vagueness of the godhead and a general obsession with “silly” sacerdotalism leaves the original covenant vulnerable. Hinduism enters a “medieval” stage when the age of the great epics and a moment of profound synthesis in the Bhagwat Gita is followed by the centuries dominated by the Puranas and Tantras. At this stage, anything, and everything nefarious and savage (Negroid fetishism or Dravidian worship of the lingam) is added to it. Countless bhaktimargas (devotional paths) are born on the basis of a monstrous mythology. The Vedic pantheism is abjectly territorialized, and figural or allegorical visions of the hypostatic forces of nature—earth, wind, or fire—are reduced to idolatry. The territorialization of the divine also compels the Hindu to find the sacred in everybody and everything—from rocks and trees, and rivers to reptiles and goblins—and have a non-chemical obsession with the purity of food and water. Despite the protestant zeal and advocations of a “pure monotheism” by thinkers like Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), SwamiDayanand Saraswati (1824–1883), or Keshubchandra Sen (1838–1884), and despite the rise of reform institutions like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, as Monier-Williams saw it in the final years of the 1870s, “[the] ancient fortress of Hinduism, with its four sides, Monotheism, Pantheism, Dualism, and Polytheism, [was] tottering and ready to fall” (Monier-Williams 1877, p. 184). In this scenario, the religion could take only two directions in the future: a cold theism revived from the Sanskrit antiquity or toward the true home in Christ.

Hindu reformers and patriots obviously did not agree with such conclusions. But projects of indigenous Hindu reform and nationalistic thought in the course of the 19th century generally followed the same textualist philosophy and editorial priorities of orientalism. That is, even when European deductions were hotly contested or subverted, the terms of engagement themselves were within the colonial Christological framework. In the reform tradition, many of Rammohun’s Christian detractors found his Vedic monotheism to be a disguised pantheism that could only end in Christ via natural religion, while Hindus suspected it to be a form of Unitarian Christianity (see Sen 2012; Basu 2020, pp. 103–9). Dayanand Saraswati’s monotheism included an abstracted set of ten commandments and a form of communion from the Vedic compendium. Keshub Chandra Sen’s (1838–1884) *Nabobihan* philosophy combined the New Testament, Vaishnava piety, and doctrinaire Hinduism and appeared to many as a kind of vernacular Christianity, including Monier-Williams who found it to be virtually the same as his Anglican faith.

This imperative of “religion” as a Christological proposition (book, law, rational essence, and monotheism) was also consistently present in conservative or Santanani responses to modernization, that is, among people who, unlike the reformers, did not want
any radical overhaul of Hindu (caste) society. It is there in Vasudha Dalmia’s richly text-
tured account of the late 19th century Banaras-based nationalization of a theistic tradition
involving the subsumption of all Vaishnava sects (and tendentially Smartas, Ganapatyas, or
Sauryas as well) into a big tent Tadiya sampradaya (Dalmia 1997). This mega-Vaishnavism
was inspired more by orientalism and contemporary Aryanism rather than traditional
Brahminism and was designed to go from polytheism to monotheism, from ritualism to
Bhakti or devotion, from many gods to Krishna. Contrary to what Europeans like Schlegel
had said, it was argued that the Jesus cult was born out of the nativity scene and other
facets of the Krishna story and not the other way round. This Vaishnavism was Prakt Mat,
the original faith, not just for Indians but for Aryan humanity in general. The construction
of this theistic movement with pan-Indian aspirations took place in concert with an overall
literary–cultural–linguistic enterprise dedicated to establishing a template of nationalism
named Hindi–Hindu–Hindustan (Dalmia, p. 27).

The institution, reform, and monothematization of Hinduism was of course a complex,
many-armed process, involving a wide basin of memories, pieties, linguistic and cultural
worlds, and pendulating identities. It would be simplistic and wrong to say that this
entire assemblage, by ineluctable historical logic, had to culminate in Hindutva. Rather,
we can say that Hindutva, along with other forces of the twentieth century, inherited
the historical paraphernalia and fault lines of that greater project, that is, in terms of
dialectical energies, transfer of discursive and affective environments, and epistemological
and political pressures, along with a million paradoxes, unresolved matters, and endemic
contradictions. Accordingly, Hindutva had to carry forward some self-orientalizing themes
like the valorization of a core Sanskritic tradition and Brahminism, a James Mill version
of providential history, a colonial ethnology to glorify Rajput or Maratha valor, and the
race imagination of Aryanism in relation to Varna as caste. To these were added organicist
conceptions of nationhood that came out of vulgarized transcriptions of Herder or Mazzini,
vitalism, Social Darwinism, and early 20th century eugenics.

Hindutva has also had to build institutions to meet long-recognized pastoral imper-
atives of “religion” and Christological monotheism: new congregational orders (the RSS
or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh); application of the Christian Mission model for
organizations devoted to charity, education, health, Dalit and tribal welfare, or disaster
relief with all following the mode the sociologist M. N. Srinivas (Srinivas 1956) has called
Sanskritization; a Hindu version of the Bible Society in the Gita Press; and the Vishwa
Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) plus its Marg Darshak Mandal (Council of
Pathfinders) and Dharam Samsads (colleges of holy men) to compensate for the historical
lack of a Hindu apex church and an ecclesiastical tradition. It is also important to remember
that the early establishment and consolidation of these institutions happened with direct
inspirations—pertaining to purity, order, race, brotherhood, and militarized chauvinism—
from European fascism.8 In order to emerge as a political monotheism, the Sangh Parivar,
as this assemblage of institutions is popularly known, had to first produce a modern Hindu
pastorate—Brahminical and Sanskritic with a neo-Vaishnavite bias, but aspiring toward a
pan-Indian ethnocultural homogeneity. As is well known, roughly from the mid-eighties,
with the help of paramilitary, vigilantist, and activist orders like the RSS or Bajrang Dal and
political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), this pastorate was fiercely mobilized
under the banner of Rama as the monothematic Hindu god. However, as it is apparent in
the information ecology that stretches from bumper stickers to internet memes, this new
age incarnation of Rama—along with that of his chief devotee Hanuman—is a hypermas-
culine and angry deity. He appears to be intolerant of apostates and infidels and therefore
demands what can be called political jealousy from his followers. Hindutva comes to its
own as political ecology when this Rama designates the historical Mughal emperor Babur
rather than the mythical Ravana as his enemy and calls for blood and sacrifice in a primal
battle against Muslims.

It is easy to understand why, in this Hindu nationalist imagination, the Pathan, who is
predominantly Muslim, can be a second-order citizen without public rights, an immigrant
to be evicted, or, in extreme cases, the object of genocidal violence. There is, however, another more benign and moderate trajectory of Hindu-normative modernization that can accept the Pathan only as an object of toleration and paternalistic care. Scholars like Jyotirmaya Sharma (2003) and Chetan Bhatt (2001), among others, have pointed out that a Neo-Vedantic impulse of modern Hindu thinking inaugurated by Rammohun Roy early in the 19th century and then carried forward by Dayanand, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Rishi Aurobindo (1872–1950), and then S. Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) and C. Rajagopalachari (1878–1972) would be crucial for the consolidation of two things in the 20th century. The first would be the idea that Hinduism, in its pure Vedic essence, was synonymous with toleration itself. Second, it could be argued that this perception formed the ontological basis of Indian-style state secularism after the constitutional revolution of 1950. The argument, as I have elaborated elsewhere in greater detail (Basu 2020, pp. 122–34), went like this: the Vedic–Upanishadic world was based on one primal intuition: that there was one universal truth that would always be beyond human powers of cognition, representation, and rational calculation. All religions of the world, including the Hindu varieties of theistic idolatry, were thus all too human endeavors to grasp what always remains beyond reach. They were therefore true in terms of an essential quest but also inevitably in error since the One Brahman could not be reduced to anthropomorphic form or an entity with qualities and attributes. This original realization, as Vivekananda famously declared in the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, made Hinduism the “mother of all religions”. S. Radhakrishnan (1973) would articulate this as a syncretic “view of life” principle. According to C. Rajagopalachari, Vedanta formed the “spiritual and cultural basis” for both Nehruvian Socialism and Nehruvian secularism and therefore the Indian Constitution itself (Rajagopalchari 1959, p. 6).

There could be no quarrels with other religions since all were pathways to the same. This presiding principle of the “mother of all religions”, therefore, by definition, could not harbor any jealousy. In practical terms, it came with a set of ideals in its various articulations. In socio-political terms, perhaps the most relevant one is the desire to re-order the gargantuan and conflict-ridden Hindu spread of thousands of castes as jati formations into a harmonious social order of four original merit-based varnas sans untouchability. What is important here is to note that this line of tolerance and the illustrious names associated with it are regularly invoked in appeals for peace during communal riots in India, that is, not just in terms of a high-minded Hindu tolerance that is antithetical to Hindu chauvinism and bigotry but in terms of an entire civilizational ethos and in the name of universal humanitarianism. Second, it is important to remember that this Hindu-normative impulse was consistent by various degrees in several key thinkers of mainstream Indian nationalism, from figures like B. G Tilak (1856–1920) and Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928) who were not quite ready to take their Hindu nationalism to the point of primal violence, to others like Bipinchandra Pal (1858–1932), Rajagopalchari, Purushottamas Tandon (1882–1962), K. M. Munshi (1887–1971), and indeed, the redoubtable M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948). The Gandhian ideal of the sarva dharma sama bhava or equality of all religions emerges from this discursive universe. For that Fabian Socialist Jawaharlal Nehru (1888–1964) himself, this spirit of Hinduization was not to be used in a restricted religious manner but in the “the widest sense of Indian culture”.

This particular Hindu-normative spirit of “tolerance” informed and often overdetermined constitutional and juridical expressions of state secularism in the Indian republic after independence. Over the decades, this has been clear in policy matters like the Hindu Code Bills of the mid-1950s, executive prioritizations, and the number of occasions when the Supreme Court of India has taken it upon itself to interpret the Hindu scriptures in order to explain the Indian secular ideal or Hinduism as a way of life. The point I am trying to make is that this sense of Sanskritic Brahminical paternalistic care imposes a spiritual hierarchy over processes of purported material equity in the ongoing Indian democratic, secular, and socialist experiment with modernity. It grips the dominant cultural, political, and juridical imaginations when it comes to minority and caste experiences in India.
in that normative civilizational light, the Muslim Pathan would be formally equal but
deemed infantile and less evolved in relation to the “mother” and therefore differentially
excluded from an imagined spiritual/cultural center of the secular nation. I will, however,
set aside this thought of a Hindu-normative Indian secularism for now and focus more on
hardcore Hindutva for the rest of the essay. Next I will take up two powerful themes in the
latter discourse: Aryanism and the idea of Akhand Bharat or undivided India. The Pathan,
one again, appears as a spatial and temporal catachresis in relation to them.

2.2. Aryanism

Aryanism flourished, as Peter van der Veer has pointed out, in a particular climate of
oxenological thinking about race after Darwin. It was around this mid-19th century mo-
ment, with the epistemological dominance of Social Darwinism, craniology, and phrenology,
that there was a shift. It was race that replaced religion, culture, or civilization as the index
of colonial difference. The speakers of Indo-European (“proto-Sanskrit”) languages of an-
tiquity were an assorted linguistic group, not a race. But from now on, they would assume
the mantle of a masterly race identity in the biological sense. It was Friedrich Max Muller
(1823–1900) who would be a key architect of this cognitive-epistemological framework.
This scientific race imagination would be bureaucratically instituted by the colonial census
commissioner H. H. Risley with the Indian census of 1901 that deployed anthropometri-
cal methods to divide the Indian people into seven types: Indo-Aryan, Aryo-Dravidian,
Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid, Scytho-Dravidian, and Turko-Iranian (see
Trautmann 1997, p. 203). In subsequent decades, Hindutva, inspired in its formative
moments by the Aryan obsession of Nazi Germany, would wed the theme of the mother
race of all civilized people with the “mother of all religions” one.

Baijayanti Roy (2016) has pointed out that early in his career, in 1847, Max Muller’s
romantic orientalist scholarship, compounded with his Lutheran faith, prompted him to
float the Aryan invasion theory. The Aryans, according to him, had conquered dark-skinned
savages and settled in India, forming a magnificent civilization that subsequently declined
due to miscegenation and the tropical climate. The ongoing Victorian rule was therefore a
resumption of Aryan civilizational activities in South Asia after the dark Islamic period.
Caste, for Max Muller, was the defining criterion for a select Indian elite to be differentially
included, as lesser cousins, in a reconstituted modern spiritual aristocracy of the Aryan
family. The objective of his ethnological philology and Protestant vision was therefore to
valorize an abstracted Vedic Monotheistic Brahminism and the social order it advocated.
Roy connects this vision to a German 19th century project to trace its people’s Teutonic
ancestry to Vedic/Indo-German/Indo-Aryan civilizational roots that were older than the
Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian. The positioning of Rg Veda as the original Aryan
Bible was necessary because it was unthinkable that God would pick only the Jewish
people for Revelation. In later decades, racial anthropology took over the Aryan question
from philology.

This postulate of the deep Aryan origins of the Hindu draws from a mid-19th cen-
tury climate of romantic orientalism, Neo-Platonism, and a general swarm of antimomian
energies that inspired Theosophists like Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891). The vision of
Aryan/Hindu colonization of the world was readily carried forward in the Indian Arya
Samaj discourse, from Dayanand Saraswati’s (1875) Satyarth Prakash to Har Bilas Sarda’s The
Hindu Superiority (1906) and beyond. This impulse deeply influenced the general pattern of
modern Indian self-reckoning. Hindutva ideology, which began by selectively borrowing
institutional forms, race mythologies, and providential enthusiasms from European fascism,
accordingly, imparted a race dimension to the religious question. Early Hindu nationalists
from B. G. Tilak to V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966) subscribed to the Aryan invasion or the Aryan
migration theory, but in recent decades, this has been replaced by the “Out of India” thesis
(Aryans were originally from India) with increasing volubility and programmatic vigor.

The phenomenon may be described as a double-shift orientalism. In the first move,
what is disavowed and reversed is the general contempt of western Aryanism (Hitler
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... and the Third Reich included) toward the Hindus as a degenerate, impure, and fallen branch. Instead, in Hindutva mythology, India becomes the cradle of the master race and the font of human civilization. It is a providential narrative bookended between past glory and the imminent restoration of India’s status as Vishwaguru, teacher of the world. Such ambitions apart, the discourse of Aryanism also variously justifies the “scientific” necessity of endogamous caste hierarchy and institutes a naturalized superiority of the Aryan north over the Dravidian south. So, here is the first conundrum. Is the Pathan not of Aryan heritage? How can he be excluded from that race–culture complex and that hoary antiquity? After all, Gandhari, the queen of King Dhritarashtra and the mother of a hundred Kaurava princes in the Mahabharata, hails from Gandhar, which is modern-day Afghanistan. Isn’t there good reason to conclude, going by the mythography itself, that the Pathan was once the Pundit? What exactly does conversion to Islam do to race and the purported Aryan qualities of the Pathan? I will keep this question pending for now. That has to do with the second element of the double-shift orientalism that I will come to later.

2.3. Akhand Bharat

The second theme is that of Hindutva as a territorialized ethics. It has to do with the primal imagination of Akhand Bharat, the ancient land with natural boundaries on all sides given to the Aryans. Undoing the Partition of 1947 and restoring the lost unity of Aryan India has been a matter of persistent heartburn for the Hindu right, despite the fact that strictly speaking, reunifying just Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India will not be enough. Along with Afghanistan in the west and Myanmar in the east, the project has to claim land from at least ten countries, three of which, including India, are nuclear armed. Nevertheless, the idea continues to resonate in Hindutva quarters. This fantasy wavers between German racist–imperialist ideas of Lebensraum and the eternal hope that modern Pakistanis and others will eventually respond to a primal call of Hindu–Aryan ancestry. In a 2015 interview given to Al-Jazeera Television, the BJP National Secretary Ram Madhav explained Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s surprise halt in Lahore to greet his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif as a gesture in the direction of reconstituting Akhand Bharat through “popular goodwill” (see Yadav 2017). In 2019, the RSS leader Indresh Kumar predicted that with proper military and diplomatic pressures, there will be a European Union-style Akhand Bharat by 2025.

The idea of Akhand Hindustan was floated during the nationalist movement and endorsed by Gandhi to counter British divide and rule policies. But after Partition and independence, it has been the Sangh Parivar led by the RSS that kept this vision alive. Writing about a decade and a half after the Partition and in between the wars with China and Pakistan in the 1960s, M. S Golwalkar (1906–1973), the second supremo or sarsangchalak of the RSS, lamented:

How many of us feel the insult that we are denied access to our holy Kailas and Manasarovar, that we have no chance even to take a dip in the sacred Sindhu, which gave us the name Hindu and Hindustan? Takshashila, once the world-center for the diffusion of Hindu thought, is no more with us. Mulasthan (Multan), which witnessed the incarnation of the terrible Narasimha for the protection of Prahlad from the demon Hiranyakashipu, is once again under the heels of a demonic domination. Do all these memories burn in our veins? (Golwalkar 1966, p. 95)

Reinvigorated Hindu sons cannot tolerate the vivisection of the motherland, so the revanchist desires are quite clear: “If Partition is a settled fact, then we are here to unsettle it” (Golwalkar, p. 93). To recreate Akhand Bharat, one would also need a part of Tibet where Mansarover is situated. India, according to Golwalkar, should have never agreed to the ceasefire in the border skirmish with China in 1962 (pp. 270–273); in 1965, Indian soldiers should have been allowed to not just liberate all of Kashmir but march onto Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Karachi, destroying not just the war potential of Pakistan but an entire Islamic hoard from Turkey to Iran (pp. 304–305). For Golwalkar, the land was divinely
bestowed to the Hindus since time immemorial (anadi), and they knew that they were a nation before the Europeans learned how to roast meat. This was punyabhu (holy land) that called for territorialized ethics. The Hindu, as in modern times, could live elsewhere but not seek the sacred elsewhere.

The idea of Akhand Bharat, as Aryan–Hindu India maximized to the point of utopia, imparts a peculiar and perhaps unique characteristic to Hindu nationalism. Unlike most other projects of religious fundamentalism, here there is a central imperative to merge sacred geography with the political one. It is perhaps in this light that we can understand why Hindutva, in recent decades, has drawn inspiration from right-wing Zionism. One could say that in practical terms, Akhand Bharat could be a perpetually deferred dream at best and an apocalyptic death drive at worst. But the specter itself sets up a powerful gravitational field for affectations and memories. In relation to that, the footprint of Islam in general and the presence of Pakistan in particular become matters of primal usurpation and loss, a perpetual source of fear without catharsis. This idea of reclaiming sacred space has to do with the primal scene of Aryan nativity and the composition of the Vedas and Upanishads.

According to Manu’s Manava Dharmasastra (second or third century CE), the country that gods made between the two divine rivers, the Sarasvati and Drsadvati, was the Brahmvarta, the land of the Vedas (Doniger and Smith 1991, Laws of Manu, 2.17). This was the land of the good people, where priestly control reigned supreme. Then the stretch between the Himalayas and the Vindhya mountains, to the east of Vinasana, where the Sarasvati disappeared, and to the west of Pragya, modern-day Allahabad, was the middle country of Aryanvarta, the abode of the Aryans. This land, where the black antelope ranged in a natural manner, was the land of sacrifices. Beyond it was the domain of the barbarians or Mlecchas devoid of Sanskrit. Manu advises that the twice born had to make every effort to settle in these countries. However, a Shudra starved of livelihood could live anywhere (2.21–2.24). The territorial distinction was based on an ontological principle of purity, not on considerations of politics, commerce, or war. In Baudhayana’s Dharmasutra too, if one ventured toward Vanga (Bengal) in the east, or Kalinga (Orissa) in the southeast, he committed a sin through his feet and had to perform sacrifices to absolve himself.

The important thing to note here is that the spiritual geographies of Brahmvarta and Aryanvarta make Akhand Bharat a calibrated space of diminishing sacredness as one moves to the south and to the east. Where the Aryan-Sanskrit overdetermination of Indian civilization as a whole and Hindu people in particular leaves tribal, Dravidians south of the Vindhyas, or easterners beginning with the Bengalis and Oriyas are easy to gauge. Meanwhile, the problem is more complicated in the northwest. The now lost Saraswati River could be anywhere between modern-day Haryana or Rajasthan in western India to the Haraxvati area of Afghanistan. Although there have been recent pseudo-scientific efforts to locate the mythical water body within India itself, there has also been a reverse tendency to shift the heart of Vedic matters westward and northward in order to “Aryanize” the Indus Valley Civilization. Indeed, Sapta Sindhu, the land of the seven rivers mentioned in the Rg Veda, could be the entire stretch from Afghanistan and the Swat valley in the west to the beginning of the Gangetic plains in the east. In this mental geography, the Pathan therefore occupies a strange temporal and spatial position, at once exterior to the imagined nation and at the heart of it. He is simultaneously, in different registers of time and becoming, both the historical Islamic intruder and the Aryan inhabitant of Brahmvarta where divinely inspired ancestors recorded revelations and primordial wisdom.

3. Mujtaba Ali’s Deshe Bideshe and the Twilight of the Subcontinental Imagination

I offer the “subcontinent” as an image of thought rather than a positively identified historical, cultural, or geographical entity. As a figuration of memory, becoming, and ecumene, it is necessarily marked by fuzzy contours. It wraps itself around ideas of the post-partition nation like a penumbra of Asiatic and worldly energies, that is, the nation that is mourned as vivisected by Partition but is, at once, the nation as it is because of
Partition. This spectral subcontinent, therefore, is in primary opposition to nationalism as territorialized ethics. One cannot be sure where and when the subcontinent as such begins and where and when it ends as a specter. Let me illustrate this peculiar feature with the confusion inherent in contemporary Hindutva discourse. In present-day India, bizarre things happen that, apart from other things, are matters of grotesque irony. A Bengali speaker, especially of the unlettered and unwashed classes, can be easily declared a suspected Bangladeshi illegal immigrant in Delhi or Uttar Pradesh, more so if she is Muslim. On the other hand, recent Hindutva mythography has been claiming the Ahom dynasty of north-east India—originally from the Yunan province of China—as a resolute 17th century Hindu bulwark against the Mughal invaders. The spectral subcontinental energies are thus spatially dispersed; they can seep into and besiege heartland India in the shape of an imposter who looks, dresses, and speaks like an “Indian”. On the other hand, all historic pendulations of identity that the subcontinent offers must be conquered by an axiomatic Hindu subjectivity. The Ahoms of the past must therefore be Hindu–Indian, even though today, visitors and students from the same northeast are regularly bullied and violated in central India for their “Chinese” features and skin color. Meanwhile, the Pathan from the west seems to have lost his Aryan credentials after conversion to Islam. The subcontinent is that basin of belongings and displacements, linguistic and cultural networks, labor histories, and migration memories from which a core, unsullied nation must be extracted for Hindutva. Measures like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) currently attempt to do that at the level of biometrics, data, archive, and electrification.

In contrast to this form of chauvinistic nationalism, I offer a counter-memory drawn from the travelogue Deshe Bideshe (At Home and Abroad) by Syed Mujtaba Ali (1904–1974), a remarkable public intellectual, essayist, humorist, raconteur, novelist, and short story writer. A polymath and a polyglot who supposedly knew more than a dozen languages, Ali produced voluminous writings in a conversational and gossipy "majlisi" prose that left an indelible impact on modern Bengali literature. Born and raised in Karimganj in present-day Bangladesh, Ali was educated in Rabindranath Tagore’s experimental university Vishwa Bharati. He subsequently got his Ph.D. from the University of Bonn in the 1930s and then completed further studies at Cairo’s Al Azhar University. Ali had shifted to East Pakistan after the Partition in 1947 but had to move back to India after getting into trouble for championing Bangla over Urdu. At various moments of his life, he worked as a scholar–academic in Kabul, Baroda, Bogura, and his alma mater Viswa Bharati, apart from stints at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the All India Radio. After retiring, Ali eventually returned to his homeland after the formation of independent Bangladesh in 1971. Deshe Bideshe, the text I will discuss here, was based on events witnessed in Afghanistan between 1927 and 1929. Ali apparently wrote his text a decade and a half later but published it only after independence, in 1949. The text is the account of a cosmopolitan humanist uniquely placed to offer us a glimpse of the subcontinental imagination. Mujtaba Ali was a visitor to Afghanistan; at different moments of his life, he was also the citizen of all three nation-states created by the Partition.

Deshe Bideshe is not the story of a Muslim encounter between subcontinental distances. It is that of a thin, five and a half feet tall Bengali going to the land of giant Pathans. When Ali reaches Peshawar, he is told that it was the city of a thousand sins, ruled by Englishmen during the day and by the Pathans by night. But as his host notes, the innocent Pathan and the crafty Englishman have one thing in common: both think that Bengalis throw bombs all the time. Later, after learning more about tribal wars and the recalcitrance of ferocious Afridis, Ali concludes that the Bengali chuck bombs and the Pathan kills English soldiers and snatch rifles for the same reason: freedom. He sees that the pagdi of the Afghan peasant serves the exact same purpose as the gamcha of the Bengali one. Even though Farsi is spoken in Afghanistan, Afghans use maal-jan (goods and life) to describe what must be protected at all costs instead of the Persian convention of jaan-maal (life and goods). That was evidently because life was cheaper here, perhaps just as much as
it was in Bengal, where people used goods and “life” in the exact same order of concern (dhone-prane). This flippant, half-serious, anecdotal, and often self-ironizing style is used to create the cumulative effect of bringing Afghanistan closer to the polyphony of the Indic civilization in the east rather than distancing it toward the Persianate ecumene in the west but all in the spirit of a jocular yet conscientious and uncompromising worldliness.

Ali’s vision is inflected by a Tagorean romanticism and has a critique of nationalism built into it. For the polymath of various parts, the elemental landscape of Afghanistan was a place where one—whether a historian, archaeologist, geographer, or geologist—would find sedimented histories of human and natural evolution. A Marxist could arrive simply with a copy of Engels’ *Origin of the Family* and survey the entire spectrum of the primitive clans, tribes, and vertical constructs of ancient and modern states within the span of a hundred miles. In the course of his stay, Ali encounters and befriends a range of colorfull characters: from Abdur Rehman the devoted manservant assigned to him to do everything from *joota polish* (shoe polishing) to *khun kharaba* (bloodshed) to Ahmed Ali the cautious Tagore and Nietzsche-reading police officer or the orthodox but wily cleric Mir Aslam who, in a moment of exasperation, says that women cannot be mullahs because they cannot grow beards. However, if the literary form of the modern travelogue presents an unavoidable ethnographical–anthropological imperative, Ali inhabits the form with self-ironizing double consciousness. He describes cultures, sartorial practices, cuisine, manners, music, and the great bazaars of Kabul animated by the dialects, activities, and ethnic paraphernalia from Azerbaijan to Delhi and beyond. But he does all of this by often turning the anthropological apparatus on its head, introducing vernacular displacements, and amplifying ethnic stereotypes to the point of absurdity. He notes, for instance, that the stature of Afghan women should tell you why the author of the Mahabharata imagined the one called Gandhari to be the mother of a hundred sons. Most importantly, Ali introduces a colloquial and irreverent comparativist impulse that lets him illuminate and reflect on situations by jetting instantly, without standard epistemological guarantees, from Hafiz to Tagore, from Julius Caesar to Babar, or from Shankaracharya to Nietzsche.

Let me come to an illustrative moment in the text that has to do with our present discussion about the Pathan and what I am calling the subcontinental imagination. At a *majlis* (gathering) in Peshawar, the talk is about an eccentric history professor called Khudabuksh who studies the mission of Jesus as one of radical wealth redistribution and that of Mohammed as one directed against the political economy of usury and finance. Khudabaksh had been recently devastated by the death of his younger brother. Ali nods and says that the man’s sorrow reminds him of the fraternal love that Rama had for Laxmana in the great Hindu epic. The gathered company tell him that they do not know much about Rama except that he was a *zabardast ladnewala*, a great fighter. As Pathans, they know that only the brave can have such great love for the brother. An army major protests that one need not be a Pathan for great fraternal feeling. Among Jews, Joseph loved Benjamin as much. When someone offers the counter example of Kane and Abel, Ali responds by invoking the theory that the Pathans were one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. He is told by a learned man present that Ali would get a lot of *shabashi* (pat on the back) for saying that thirty years ago, when prestige could be garnered only by tracing one’s lineage to those Biblical–Hebraic roots. Now, on the other hand, all Pathans were Aryans. It was they who had composed the Vedas, cultivated Gandhar art, and defeated Alexander. The Gandhar of the Mahabharata was indeed Kandahar of today. However, despite that, all in the *majlis* declare that now the Pathans were not interested in becoming Hindustanis. Having chased away the British, the frontier provinces would not join an eventually independent India. But they would readily promise to keep the Russians out.

The point, however, as Ali observes later, was that it was impossible to write a history of India without the history of Afghanistan—that Afghanistan whose north is embroiled in the history of Turkmenistan, the west with that of Iran, and the east with the histories of India and Kashmir. The Iranian Emperor Cyrus conquered Afghanistan and advanced up to the Indus in the 6th century BCE. That is how things stayed till Alexander arrived. Later,
north-central India’s Chandragupta Maurya conquered it all except for the Balhik province. Ali impishly speculates that when Asoka the Great sent his Buddhist missionaries, the Afghans readily took to Buddhism because the arid land was not conducive for the Hindu caste system. (Deshe Bideshe 122). After the Mauryas came Menander the Greek, then the Sakas, the Indo-Parthians, and the Kusanas. When India turned toward Vaishnavite Sanatan dharma under the Guptas in the middle of the first millennium, the Afghans carried on with their Buddhism. Ali notes that it is with the Islamic conquests and Islamization that (colonial) historians seem to draw a line. It was as if temporalities and destinies had to split and diverge once the Afghans became Muslims. Ali writes:

If it is said that Afghans must have a separate history because they became Muslims, then let me point out that they once worshipped the fire, prayed to the Greek gods and goddesses, took to the anti-Veda Buddhist religion. When the histories of the two lands could not be divided then, why should some Mahabharata be rendered impure if they become Muslims? If the Kabuli did not become a Magadhi by taking shelter in the Buddha, then he hasn’t become an Arab by becoming a Muslim (Deshe Bideshe 127).

Ali locates both Afghanistan and undivided India in a wider civilizational complex that would be marked by Farsi literature; Buddhist literary traditions in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese; Byzantine, Saracen, and Persian architecture; Yunani medicine; Greek mathematics and Vedic thought; a certain form of encyclopedic historiography inaugurated by Al Biruni (973–1048), Arabic–Persian scriptural and juridical traditions; and tea, silk, and a million other things. It withstood disruptive invasions, conquests, wars, and looting by the likes of Timur and Nadir Shah, but its integrity was never fundamentally based on the question of political sovereignty. The imagined subcontinent that undergirds Ali’s study and reckoning of the frontier is the great absorbent. It is held together by shared traditions and memories, deeply buried histories in the sand, friendship, hospitality, conviviality, and honor. It was the colonial historiographical apparatus of the British that had ordered a categorical vivisection between Indo-Afghan historical and temporal imaginations. It was also the British and an alien epistemology that insisted on political sovereignty as sole factor of decision when it came to the self and other. When the Englishmen arrived in these parts, Afghanistan and India had witnessed, for the first time, a race of people who wanted to rule without calling either of the countries their home. This was as if the loot of Timur or Nadir Shah was a permanent fixture rather than a temporary jolt. But why exactly is Islam and the figure of the Muslim key to this orientalist logic of separation?

4. Bollywood and Orientalism’s Islam

I will now set up a contrast between Mujtaba Ali’s mid-20th-century historical–anthropological vision with some pictures of Afghanistan that come to us via contemporary Bollywood. In recent popular Hindi cinema, we have seen a bevy of historical characters like the 14th century emperor Alauddin Khilji (1266–1316) of the Delhi Sultanate in Padmaavat (Bhansali 2018), Ahmed Shah Abdali (1720–1772) of the Durrani empire in Panipat (Gowarikar 2019), and Muhammad Ghori (1144–1206) of the Ghurid dynasty in Samrat Prithviraj (Dwivedi 2022). There are many more, but I thought of these three because all of them were born the land of the Pathans. I will plead guilty to using the markers Pathan and Afghan interchangeably at this point, but insofar as a contemporary Hindu nationalist Islamophobia is concerned, it really makes no difference. To say that these cinematic incarnations are outcomes of aggressive stereotyping bordering on caricature is beside the point. All three emperors listed above—geographically and temporally separated from each other, sometimes by centuries—bear a certain Muslimness that is indistinguishable from an imputed Turko–Arab pathology. Let me illustrate this with Bhansali’s film. Padmaavat is the story of emperor Alauddin Khilji besieging the Rajput kingdom of Mewar because he is drawn in lust toward Padmavati, the queen of Rawal Ratan Singh, the ruler. The Rajputs put in a valiant resistance in the face of treachery and deceit. They die to the last man, and all the women of Fort Chittor, led by Padmavati, save their honor
by immolating themselves in an act of Jauhar, a ritualistic form of mass suicide. The
categorical separation and polarization of the Hindu–Muslim worlds in the visual and
aural treatment in the film is stark (see Roy 2018). The cinematic Chittor in the film is
sumptuous, well-kissed by the sun or bathed by the golden light of a million lamps. Life
is marked by Sanskritized speech, decorative, mannered, or choreographed movements,
elaborate vegetarian cuisine, gendered segregation of bodies, and a strict hierarchical
ordering of gazes and privileges of access. In contrast, the oriental world of the Sultanate
in Delhi is a construct of a fin-de-siecle, darkly romantic mode of thinking and imagining
the oriental other as figure of civilizational and racial decadence, as a repository of libido
nal and psychotic excesses, as lacking in normative human ethical consciousness and reason.
The imperial court of Delhi—which, historical reason would tell us, was much richer than
the provincial kingdom of Mewar—is stark, stony, dirty, and full of intrigue in the shadows.
There is no administration in this world, only the arbitrary will of the tyrant. There is no
trade or visible revenue generation, only plunder and loot. There are no stable kinship ties
or an actual Islamic culture and society, only a militarized tribe of potential paricides under
the absolute command of the despot who is all instinct. There is no sign of intellection
or the arts. The iconic Sufi mystic, poet, historian, and polymath scholar Amir Khusraw
(1253–1325)—whose immense contributions to and influences on subcontinental cultures
over the ages are comparable to Virgil’s or Dante’s in the west—for the most part remains
just a fawning apologist of power.

The cinematic Alauddin Khilji is brash, cruel, devoid of table manners, etiquette, and
fashion sense, and thus stripped of all markers of classical Persianate culture of which the
historical one would be legatee. He composes bad verse and compels Amir Khusraw to laud
it. He has a strange fetish for caged birds, applies perfume on himself by dousing his slave
girl with attar and then rubbing his body against her, devours meat like a savage, smears
his face with his own blood before a battle, and has a penchant for displaying severed heads
of enemies. His quirks—as the oriental despot who owns all riches, all destinies, and all
women—may be explained as various expressions of a primal sex instinct that determines
his being. Allauddin’s politics is simply the libidinal pursued by other means. He treats
his own queen Meherunissa with sadistic psychological violence, fornicates with slave
girls, tortures a captured Rajput princess, and of course launches a war simply because
he desires Padmavati, the queen of Mewar. But for the moral perspective that dominates
the film, the greatest expression of an imputed Turko–Arabic pathology is the emperor’s
homosexual liaison with his slave Malik Kafur who bathes him, caresses him in public, and
has full access to Allauddin’s bedchamber whether he is with the queen or a slave girl.

This Hindu nationalist perspective has a longer legacy of a double-shift orientalism. I
have elaborated the first move earlier; it involves claiming the Aryan mantle exclusively
for the Brahminical Hindu. In short, this is the “out of India” myth. The second move is
what imbues the spectral, terrorizing Muslim—in this case the Afghan from what used to
be the land of Queen Gandhari—with a Turko–Arabic pathology. This imputation, of course,
is a confused one. It mixes up the question of religion and culture with a 19th century
primordialism of race. The confusion pertains to the question Mujtaba Ali had asked: how
can the Pathan stop being Aryan as soon as he becomes Muslim? However, the cinematic
Allauddin Khilji becomes the other in Bollywood not just because he is a Muslim
he is therefore, in essence, a Semite contra the Aryan. This has to do with an often-overlooked
division along racial lines in greater Orientalist discourse that Edward Said (1979) points
to in his magisterial study. It is the distinction between the “lower orient” of l’empire du
Levant, which came into being with Herodotus and Alexander, and the “higher” golden
orient of Schlegel, one that had produced the Upanishads, the Avesta, and Sakuntala. In the
orientalism of the Hindutva imagination, the people of Gandhar remain Aryan even when
they embrace Buddhism or worship the fire. But once they are Muslim, they are inevitably
claimed, body and soul, by a Semitic contagion that displaces them from the sphere of the
higher Aryan orient to the lower Semitic one. But what exactly does this contagion do to
the erstwhile Hindu in psychosomatic terms? Perhaps an answer can be found in Hindutva
ideologue V. D Savarkar’s very complicated theory of the Hindu as a race or jati. In an insightful reading of Savarkar’s 1923 pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, Chetan Bhatt has pointed out that Savarkar’s idea was based on both sensibility and heredity. It is therefore not enough for the Pathan to be the blood brother of the Pundit in a banal bio-scientific sense; the Hindu is a Hindu because he is able to feel the ancient blood that coursed through the bodies of Rama or Krishna in his veins (Bhatt, 95–96). Logically speaking, it would thus imply that when the children of Gandhar converted to Christianity, they were overcome by a great oblivion and lost that primal feeling.

In that case, what does becoming Semite mean in terms of classical, Christological orientalism? Said points out that in the broad trajectory of orientalist discourse from Dante or Marlowe of the Renaissance to Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan in the 19th century, or H.A.R. Gibbs, Louis Massignon, and Bernard Lewis of the 20th century, there were certain commonalities in the overall western perception of Islam and the Turko–Arab world. In the extreme end, Islam was a fraudulent version of Christianity or an eastern heresy with Mohammed as the debauch interloper replacing Christ as analogue in Mohammedanism. Later, in the hands of Massignon, for instance, it would become the religion of Ishmael in Biblical terms, the monotheism of people excluded from the divine promise made to Isaac (Said 1979, pp. 267–68). Islam therefore could be understood as a creed of juvenile resistance to the father; it was a political instrument rather than an authentic religion, and the Qu’ran and the Hadith, accordingly, were sufficient to explain all phenomena in all Arabic societies. The Arab mind and heart had inherited the philosophical legacy of Greece without knowing what to do with it. Christianity was born among these Semites, but it was in Europe that it flourished. The Arabs, in that ethnological sense, were merely “Jews on horseback” (Said 1979, p. 102).

In the depths of the orientalist vision that we see in Bhansali’s film, Khilji, the invader of the Aryan world, is, in essence, a despot Semite with a hooked nose, an exotic Flaubertian figure of bizarre jouissance marked by ill breeding, carnivorousness, alcohol, and bad hygiene. This essentially 19th century romantic vision is radically different from *Padmavat*’s declared source. Bhansali’s film begins with a disclaimer that the film is inspired by Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s 16th century Awadhi epic poem *Padmavat*, which is a work of fiction. As such, the film makes no claims about historical authenticity or accuracy. However, even when it comes to fictional inspirations, Baijayanti Roy (2018) has pointed out that *Padmavat* is much more faithful to the colonial, 19th century enframing of the legend in James Tod’s *Annals and Antiquities of Rajas’than* (1829) than to Jayasi’s poem. In Jayasi’s allegorical Sufi epic—replete with not just the Islamic philosophy but also Nath and Yogic imagery—Alaundin Khilji makes his appearance right at the end, when it is too late to fight a war. Ratan Singh is killed not by the forces of the Sultanate but in a battle with another Rajput prince. Padmavati and the women of Chittor perform jauhar, and when the Sultan finally reaches Chittor, he finds nothing there. Jayasi’s Alauddin reflects on his futile victory and the nature of human desire. At the end, Jayasi declares that in his allegory, Chittor becomes the body, Ratan Singh becomes the mind, and Padmavati becomes human wisdom. Khilji stands in for lust, which is maya or illusion. The sultan finally realizes that transcendence can be attained only through love and not by force (see Roy 2018; Lal 1950, pp. 120–30).

From a standard historical perspective, there could, of course, be many general objections to the film *Padmavat* beginning with the fact that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Queen Padmavati actually existed. But I am interested in something else. Can there be a different reckoning of historical Islam that departs from this orientalist framework to account for not just Muslim flourishing in the subcontinent but also the being Muslim of Khilji, Khusraw, or Jayasi, that is, one that is capacious enough to accommodate all so-called virtues, talents, and vices in Islamic societies and view them through a different lens of historical understanding? In the immediate context, these would be the philosophy, poetry, and music of Khusraw, the Sufism of Jayasi plus his dalliances with “non-Islamic” traditions (which included a work on Krishna), and indeed the sovereignty,
the wine-drinking, and queerness of Alauddin Khilji. The larger issues we will glimpse at are the historical consequences of an orientalist–anthropological enframing of Islam as “religion” and as “world religion,” which, among other things, produced Islam as a competing political monotheism to Hindu India.

5. Historical Islam and Orientalism’s Religion of Islam

Ayesha Jalal has pointed out that modern reckonings of Islam are overdetermined by Arabic culture, despite the fact that some of the key innovations of Islamic thought have taken place in the subcontinent, home to more than a third of the total world Muslim population. Among other important distinctions, South Asian Islam, even the orthodox traditions, never severed its connections with Mystical thinking, especially Sufism based on the ethical writings of Ibn Miskawayh (940–1030) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and the poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273). The majority of Muslims in the subcontinent have been Sunnis following the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, but then there have been the Shiias, early Qarmatian groups and their remnants, the Sufis, the Ahmadiyyas who recognize a final prophet succeeding Muhammad, the Dawoodi Bohras, Khojas and other Ishmaelites, the Navayats of Konkan, the Mappilas of Malabar, the Kayam Khans of Rajasthan, and dozens of orders that have resided between Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies. Historically, royalist Islam in India has always been afflicted by tensions between the orthodoxy of a Sunni clerical establishment (Sharia) and the popular mysticism of the Sufis or radical disavowals of all earthly authorities by Ismailis or Qarmatians. With the advent of the Chisti, Suhrawardi, and Firdausi sects between the 12th and 15th centuries, it was Sufism that emerged as the prime missionary force in the subcontinent. Later groups like the Sattari, the Quadiri, or the Naqshbandi, inspired by the pantheism of the Andalusian scholar Ibn-Arabi (1165–1240), entered into rich, syncretic, and vernacular commerce with Hindu devotional sects. Active in the Punjab, they would contribute to an affective universe that would birth, among other things, the Indic monotheism of Sikhism.

A. Azhar Moin’s remarkable study has shown how the Mughal emperors, Akbar in particular, established a new form of sovereignty by styling themselves on the lines of Sufi saints. It was a form of kingship based on the charisma of holiness (wilayat) and a principle of tolerance (zimmi) rather than religious law (sharia) or holy war (Jihad). In all, Imtiaz Ahmad has postulated three registers of Islamic practice in India. The first would be marked by traditional pan-Islamic scriptural governance; the second set is marked by local, customary deviations in religious behavior, including birth or death rituals or popular celebrations of Muharram; and the third presents an eclectic cosmology with Muslim saints, Hindu gods, and a vast spectrum of beliefs pertaining to deliverance from disease, famine, misfortune, or malevolent spirits.

Let us turn to a moment in Shahab Ahmed’s groundbreaking study What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic (2016), in which the historical Amir Khusraw makes an appearance. Ahmed invokes a poem by Khusraw in which he describes a majlis (musical gathering) that starred a diva called Turmati Khatun. In Khusraw’s description, Turmati Khatun’s magnificent singing sends listeners and the artist herself to a state of rapture (tarab) and transportation (tarraba) to an entirely different condition of being. This is not just an aesthetic feeling but a spiritual elevation that allows for the experience of the divine and the intellectual act of divination. With play and irony, but also profound meaningfulness, Khusraw alludes to the Quranic description of the day of judgment, which is a day of gathering and also a day of rising when the people will be seen drunk, but they will not be drunk. The private majlis of discerning listeners who are “knowers of the science of meaning” is therefore compared with the scene at the day of resurrection when consciousness will transcend given realities and the real truth of being will be irresistibly laid bare. (Ahmed 2016, pp. 426–27). The important point here is that this amalgam of bihusu (transcendence of habitual consciousness), perplexity or hayrat, and movement or harakat is experienced and conceptualized by Khusraw in entirely Islamic terms. In his language that combines philosophy, Sufism, theology, Quranic exegesis, and law, God
becomes the ultimate conductor who corrects all errors of disharmony. “He is also the All-Wise, al-Hakim, who knows the hikmah, or universal wisdom contained in and expressed by music” (Ahmed, 429).

But how can this assertion by Khusraw—polymath intellectual and poet, progenitor of several South Asian musical traditions like the khayal, the qawwali, and the tarana—be Islamic? How can it be so when a dominant legal system based on the Hadith declares that only a certain kind of devotional music is permitted in Islam, with limited instrumentation and a strict prohibition on women singing in front of men? It is this question and questions like these that Ahmed explores in his monumental study. He elaborates Islam as a complex, many-armed human and historical phenomenon roughly between 1350 and 1850 ADE, across a vast geographical expanse he calls the Balkans to Bengal complex, which, for Ahmed, made a Turko–Persianate ecumene. Ahmed stages a counter-history by positioning a set of provocative questions to the modern cognitive apparatus: what is Islamic about Islamic philosophy or Islamic science? What is Islamic about Sufism? What can be Islamic about Islamic art, music, or poetry? And indeed, what can be Islamic about drinking wine?

The Aristotelian and neo-Platonic philosopher Ibn Sina (known to the west as Avicenna, 980–1037) had declared that there was a superior divine truth beyond revelation that was accessible only to an intellectual elite. The Qu’ran, in other words, did not exhaust the entire cosmology of the divine. Rather, the limited and literal revelation was only for the lowest common denominator. Ibn Sina’s conclusions and his metaphysics were, of course, often denounced, most famously by al-Ghazali in his 11th century treatise Refutation of the Philosophers (Tahafut al-Falasifa). But the Avicennan philosophical method laid the foundations of Islamic scholastic theology (ilm al-kalam) that would follow. For Shiias as well as Sunnis, Ibn-Sina was “the man who effectively defined God for Muslims” (Ahmed, 19). Ahmed uses his work and others like that of Ibn Khaldun (1331–1406), Shihab al-Din al-Surhawardi (1145–1234), and Ibn Arabi to negate a “marginality thesis” that afflicts modern studies of Islam—that scientific and philosophical activity were not central concerns of Islamic societies. On the contrary, Ahmed argues that the philosophical vein was widely constitutive of Islam. Philosophers were tasked with knowing the divine truth and hikmah or the wisdom of God manifest in a greater truth labyrinth beyond the Qu’ran. Thus, they were called Hakims. The Prophet, in that sense, was simply the uber-philosopher. There were, of course, many other Muslims who wanted to submit haqiqah to the sharia, but generally, in the Balkans to Bengal complex, it was faith that had to accommodate itself to philosophy and not the other way around.

Similarly, Sufis said that as virtuoso “friends of God” (awliya allah), they were in a state of experimental and existential unity with real truth or al haqiqah. As such, they were no longer bound by common strictures of Islamic law and practice. Reaching this heightened existence involved a rigorous development of all faculties (tariqas), not just reason. The visible world of Quranic witnessing was alam al shahadah; it was the world of the fique or metaphor. On the other hand, the world of the unseen—the alam-al-gayab from where revelation emanates—was the alam-al-haqqah, or the world of real truth (Ahmed, 20). All earthly laws could be set to null when the real truth is revealed; it was only the lowest truths that had to be managed by jurists with al-shariah, the revealed law. Ahmed’s point, once again, is that this Sufi paradigm was not marginal in Islamic societies. It was central, and Muslims always struggled to achieve a balance of truth between Sufism and the interpretive tradition of jurists. An entire tradition of Akhlaki ethics was developed to achieve that balance.

It is in this light that we can look at Diwan of Hafiz (1320–1390), the most popular book of poetry in the Islamic world that explores wine and (homo) erotic love and has a disparaging attitude toward piety. “Hafizocentrism”, according to Ahmed, was key to the construction of Islamic identity. Up to the 1950s, Muslim children in Iran, Afghanistan, and India were first taught to memorize the Quran and then the Diwan. This was no esoteric matter reserved for the leisurely elite; Sufism moved the masses, and even street beggars knew these ghazals. Hafiz, for the Muslim world, was lisan ul gayab—tongue of the
unseen—and the *Diwan* was the pocketbook for all existential conflicts between desire and law. The *Diwan* celebrates intoxication as the state of deepened and widened imagination and sensuality. Here wine and the beloved were gateways to the experience of the divine. In the Maddhab-i-ishqi—a way of going about being Muslim—earthly love was metaphorical (*ishq-i-majazi*). The aesthetic–experimental transcendence of that was to know real-true love (*ishq-i-haqiqui*). The poetic/intoxicated departure was necessary because these two worlds of the seen and unseen shared a non-linear relationship of ambiguity and ambivalence. We can therefore understand why Muslim societies valorized art, music, and wine with great royal patronage even though dominant legal systems proscribed or limited them. For similar reasons, in an inscription on his wine cup, Emperor Jehangir can declare his drinking to be the act of a Ghazi or Muslim warrior and keeper of the faith. As a drinker of wine, he is a knower of signs, real and metaphorical; he can distinguish between the signatures of *hakikah* from those of *majaz* (Ahmed, p. 70).

Islamic art, music, or wine drinking, for Ahmed, are not paradoxes. The paradox was Islam itself. He describes a polyphonic and clamorous world after major theological debates had somewhat settled Islam in the twelfth century. The incredibly rapid imperial spread of the faith—from the African shores of the Atlantic to the Steppes of Central Asia within a century of the Prophet’s passing.—had earlier denied it the opportunity to consolidate an apex church and homogenize on the lines of Pauline Christianity. Faith, philosophy, Sufism, poetry, or wine therefore always meant different things to different people, without any infallible authority pontificating in regional debates. Even the so-called five pillars of Islam—*Sahadah* (the unicity or *tawhid* of God), *Salat* (five daily prayers), *Sawm* (fasting during Ramadan), *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), and *Zakat* (stipulated alms giving)—were not uniformly accepted in Islamic societies. It could be said that only the *Sahadah* achieved some sort of stability; the remaining four were fiercely contested along theological, philosophical, and cultural lines. In studying these phenomena, Ahmed’s purpose is simply to identify a “coherent dynamic” of “internal contradiction” (Ahmed, p. 113), as much neo-Platonic as it was Mohammedan.

It is not my purpose here to elaborate on Ahmed’s complicated navigation of orientalism and modern Islamic studies, featuring several generations of scholars from A. R. Gibb, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Marshall Hodgson to Bernard Lewis, Talal Asad, and Hamid Dabashi. Instead, we can come to the key question: what happened to this premodern Islamic spread once philologically driven colonial anthropology and then later a Geertzian understanding of the semiotics of culture began to make it into and reckon with it as a *religion*? The process that Ahmed describes is similar to what happened with Hinduism in India or Shinto Buddhism in Meiji Japan. To make a “religion”, one had to use the Christological model to identify a doctrinal “core” of Islam. In this case, the normative Islam as religion would be dictated by fuqaha/ulema clerics via *fiqh* jurisprudence and Kalam theology. The Sharia would emerge not just as a juridical entity but as the total discourse of religion, regulating all details of lived life.

The legal position therefore became supremacist in the modern paideia of Muslims, in conjunction with nation thinking and the nation-state system in which law is valorized over anything else, that is, despite evidence suggesting that a lot of law in Muslim societies of the past was *Siyasah* or *qanun*, not *fiqh* or Sharia (*usul-al-fiqh*). Ruler’s law was based on political expediency, collective reason, ethical tradition, or communal experience and custom, with *akhlaki* ethics mediating between Sharia and Qanun. The Hadith was indeed designed to conquer a many-armed Islam, but it took five centuries to establish itself, with opponents refusing to believe that the Prophet had authored them. It was a contextual development in Islam, but now the Hadith would serve as the *only* context of Islam, along with its aversion to forms of historical thinking in the Islamic traditions: epic prophetic biography (*sirah* and *maghazi*), history (*tarikh*), and Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*). Among other things, this creates strange temporal imaginations. The Muslim societies studied by Ahmed never felt the need to imitate the *salafs* (the first generation of Muslims) in every which way. Today modern Salafists, much like Hindu fundamentalists in search of pure and
authentic origins, desire to bring back that pristine life strictly guided by religious laws and revelation as text, with the Salafs and the Rashidun Caliphate as the only contextual reference for being and becoming.

In the modern age, philosophy would therefore be gradually jettisoned from the “religious”, Sufism would be domesticated as a form of quietist individual piety, and wine would enter the Durkheimian domain of the profane, as opposed to sacred works like sanctioned pilgrimage or prayer. Jehangir’s intoxication could now be accounted for in terms of civilizational decadence or secular practice but never as an Islamic act of a Ghazi. Similarly, the ghazals of Hafiz or the poetry of Khusraw and Jayasi, along with painting, music, and architecture and all explorations in the realm of paradox and metaphor, would be compartmentalized into the “secular” realm of “Islamicate culture”. The philosopher, the physician, or the natural scientist, who once worked with signs of creation and cosmic phenomena in order to discern the truth of the unseen, would now stop being authoritative on questions of faith and being. The eclipse of the cosmic dimension of thinking the “unseen” in the philosophical-Sufi amalgam beyond the revealed text, and the relegation of historicity and contextuality would also create a stagnant orthodoxy unable to address matters of truth and justice pertaining to the condition of women, human rights, or social evils like slavery.

This neo-traditionalist ascendency can be attributed to a set of well-known historical phenomena: empire, orientalism, the rise of the House of Saud, modern Wahhabism, and CIA money, as well as the petro-dollar. Ahmed points out that historically, the religious–secular duality has often played out in schizophrenic ways in Muslim majority nation-states. It has been either all Islamic law, as in the Arabia of the House of Saud, or no Islamic law, in Ataturk’s Turkey or in Afghanistan under King Amanullah (1892–1960) witnessed by Mujtaba Ali. The orientalist–anthropological necessity for a “religion” to identify a doctrinal core and institute a clerical orthodoxy has resulted in theocratic governments virtually operating as centralized churches. Meanwhile, modern Muslims are unable to square the present religious “fact” of Islam with the artifacts of their past—the poetic–philosophical makings of the self in Hafiz or Khusraw, the paintings, the architecture, or the wine-cup of Jehangir. The legal supremacist position is now globally industrialized in terms of perception among Muslims as well as their friends and enemies. Among other things, it creates the historical illusion that law was always the paramount and despotic reality in Islamic societies. As a result of this shift in the modern cognitive apparatus, today, increasing Muslim presence in many non-Muslim majority contexts across the world seems to inevitably raise the specter of Sharia law. Just as in a certain Hindutva ecology of the present, the rule of the Pathan/Afghan Alauddin Khilji or, increasingly, any Muslim ruler of the past can only be pictured as a fierce and pathological despotism of the Semitic kind or the rule of Sharia as absolutist ethics.

6. Conclusions and an End Note on the Secular

Ahmed speaks of an epistemological cutoff point and a great oblivion that disconnects the modern Muslim from their pasts. It is quite similar to the amnesia G. N. Devy has noted in the Indic context, brought on by colonialism: “In India... modern critical consciousness is confronted by the mid-nineteenth century as a sort of cut-off point, incapable of tracing [its] tradition backward beyond that moment. It is a profoundly significant perception, one that helps illuminate the aporia of a range of disciplines in the humanities, as of literary production itself. Both these terrains of religious modernization in Christological terms have created the competing Hindu–Muslim political monotheisms that imperil what I am figuratively calling the subcontinental imagination. This does not mean that conflict between Islamic and Hindu groups did not exist before the colonial period. However, they were contextual and not axiomatic wars conducted with the nation and the nation-state in mind. I should also make it clear that the “religious” modernization that I have critiqued here should not be conflated with modernity as a transformational compendium of values that has been, in many ways, historically liberating for women, for Dalits, for religious
minorities, and for the proletariat and the peasantry. I am using the term modernization as Rajani Kothari (1997) has insightfully used it in relation to caste and politics in India. Modernization, in that sense, is not a process by which modernity trumps tradition; rather, it is one in which “tradition” is invented as the intimate enemy of the modern, and the two keep entering into new symbiotic arrangements and thresholds of mutual “integration and performance” (Kothari 1997, p. 58). To think critically along these lines therefore does not mean suggesting that we somehow undo the works of the modern and bring back some original everyday Indic tolerance. That would be signing up for an illusory revivalist project of one’s own, one that is actually a mirror image of the ones of Salafists or Ram Rajya fundamentalists.

The task of secular thinking in our times should be to recognize, preserve, and increase the liberating powers of the modern without surrendering powers of imagination and thought to the majoritarian nation and its state. It is also to trace the loss of pluralist possibilities, of vernaculars, and modes of imaginative self-making that modernization inevitably entails. I would like to propose a mode of subcontinental “secular” thinking without trying to universalize it as something ready to be exported to all historical contexts. This is an intellectual stance that does not involve indifference to religion or equidistance from all religions but rigorous analysis of religious matter—texts, faith systems, mythologies, devotional traditions, articles of deep and profound affectation, practices of transcendence, and structures of feeling—without the paradigmatic dominance of that anthropological category called religion. The orientalist abstraction of modern “Mohammedanism” and “Hinduism” involved sovereign selections and great redactions, much like how the Pauline Church—invested with papal infallibility and apostolic succession—separated canonical truth from the gnostic, the pagan, or the apocryphal. In the cases we have studied, this is how the Hadith assumes singular authority over the sirah, maghazi, or the tafsir traditions; Sanskrit over the vernaculars, the Bhagwad Gita over Anugita—that other Krishna-Arjun dialogue in the Mahabharata—or a standard Ramayana over hundreds of other ones. It is on this basis that “religion” now speaks with an exacting monolingual authority in the age of instant electronic dissemination and evisceration of historical consciousness. The creative and intellectual task of the secular is to make little traditions multi-vocal again, to proliferate stories and legends, and to combat increasing identarian homogeneity with new Dalit, kamin, and feminist energies. It is to simultaneously devolve a vernacular critique of neoliberal capital and find a new emancipatory language for the questions of class and caste.

The other important task of secular thinking is to understand political monotheism as something that creates a majoritarianism by generalizing the minority experience. We have seen how the historical Pathan, once Vedic–Aryan, then a follower of the Greek gods, a Buddhist, and finally a Muslim, occupies the heart as well as the outside of the Hindutva temporal imagination. But this is true not just of him and the Muslim in general but for many other figures like the assertive Dalit, the poor and the unwashed, the meat-eating devoted Kali-worshipper, the Dravidian, the caste apostate who discards the surname or the holy thread, anyone who does not know the Hindi language, the circumcised Hindu male caught in the middle of communal riots, the queer and the transgendered, and the working woman who is seen in public. Similarly, in the Taliban rule and other such Muslim contexts, it is the Hazari, the Ahmadiyya, the Sunni who does not want to wear the beard or the cap, the devout Shia who desires to paint or drink wine, the little girl who wants to go to school, the woman who wants to drive, and many others. It is inevitable that all, including the faithful, are differentially excluded from an absolutist center of purity and virtue. The mobilized zealots of political monotheism are therefore, to invoke an image from Hannah Arendt, a mass of essentially lonely individuals. In relation to the maximized phantom figures of the Vedic–Aryan Brahmin and the Salaf, all are perpetually caught in a collective state of hypocrisy in the etymological sense of the Greek hupokrisis, which means “playing a part”.

I have presented the thought of the subcontinent as that spectral outside that haunts the territorialized ethics of Hindutva. The imagined center of Hindutva cannot define itself without differentially including/excluding figures from that outside, be it the Pathan, the Ahoms of Assam, or the Bengali speaking suspected Bangladeshi in Delhi. The “subcontinent”, in that sense, is everywhere and nowhere. It is due to this haunting that the purported Hindu Rashtra as political space cannot articulate itself without the idea of Akhand Bharat as absolutely sacred space. Conversely, to think in terms of the subcontinental imagination is necessarily to occupy a non-place and assume a deliberate state of unhomeliness and exile in relation to the territorial nation. It is to see the generality of the minority experience in majoritarian politics. I would like to end this essay by illustrating this postulate with another moment from Syed Mujtaba Ali’s *Deshe Bideshe* involving a predicament and a realization of a Bengali Muslim in the land of the Muslim Pathan.

Toward the end of his sojourn, Ali gets caught in the middle of the Afghan civil war that resulted in Habibullah Kalakani (1891–1929) ousting King Amanullah from the throne. He loses his teaching position and spends anxious days and weeks on the brink of starvation, cut off from his savings in Peshawar and his family and friends in India. It is then, when he is caught between British imperial designs in South Asia and the spectre of Bolshevism in the north, between Amanullah’s nation-state enterprise toward an Ataturkian modernization and Kalakani’s fierce tribal resistance to it, that Ali experiences a generalization of the imperiled minority experience that engulfs all around him except for the exalted Europeans in the embassies. It becomes manifest in the British ambassador Sr. Francis’s apathy toward his marooned Indian subjects and also in the vulnerability of Kabulis who are seen to be Persianate urban interlopers by the Tajik Kalakani. The Kabulis, who were ready to discard the *hijab* as well as the *shilawar* and embrace western education and culture at Amanullah’s behest, were now to be punished.

Eventually, Ali is granted a seat in a British rescue plane. But before he leaves, he goes to visit the nondescript tomb of emperor Babur (1483–1530) one last time. A descendent of Genghis and Timur who founded the Mughal empire, a poet, intellectual, and writer, a fierce Sunni who was the self-proclaimed destroyer of infidels and apostates, the Turko-Mongol-Persianate Babur had desired to be buried in his beloved transit point in Kabul and not in the Ferghana Valley (in modern-day Uzbekistan) where he was born, nor in the India that he ruled. At the spot overlooking the entire Kabul valley, Ali realizes that it was an apt and well-chosen burial site for an unrestful soul who did not find peace either in the land of his birth outside the subcontinent or in the one inside that he ruled. It was a place from where one could see the mountains of India in the east and those of the Hindukush in the north en route to Ferghana. The “subcontinent” we have proposed is perhaps a crucial mental “non-place” space beyond the restricted and often fatal imaginaries of nationality and natality that always produce a modern minority experience. If it is a critical space of exile in between the dual existences of the poet and the assassin, a dwelling in between the provinciality of the home and the turbulence of the world, then it is one that Babur, mighty emperor, found only in death.

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1. See (Basu 2021); also, Chapter 4 of Hindutva as Political Monotheism (2020). On Bollywood and an overall Hindu-normative and informational turn of the century modernization, see (Basu 2010).


4. In recent decades, there has been a significant body of research challenging the idea that “Hinduism” was an orientalist-colonial invention. I have in mind works like Lorenzen (1999) that argued in favor of a longer medieval genesis of Hindu consciousness, roughly from the 15th century. See also O’Connell (2017) on the Gaudiya tradition of Bengal and Nicholson’s (2010) influential book Unifying Hinduism that charts doxographic efforts to unify the people of the Vedas between the 12th and 16th centuries, I have responded to these in Basu (2010), pp. 91–92. Encyclopedic, Universalist lines of doxographic thinking toward a broader Vedic world did certainly exist before colonialism. However, the unification project of Hinduism as a “religion”, as a political phenomenon in reference to the modern state and nationhood, in conversation with colonial ethnology, and pressured by the monothetic imperative of modern religious anthropology, certainly came into being in the 19th century.


7. On the modern career of Gita, see Bandyopadhyay (2016, pp. 3–192).

8. See Casolari (2000). For more detailed histories of Hindu Nationalist movements and institutions, see, for instance, Basu (1993, 2017, 2020), Jaffrelot (1996), van der Veer (1994), Hansen (1999), Bhatt (2001), Ludden (2007), Katju (2010), Anderson and Damle (2019), Chatterjee et al. (2019), and Sarkar (2021). The Hindu nationalist Balakrishna Shrivam Moonje (1872–1948) visited Rome in 1931 and was deeply impressed by the martial order of youth organizations like the Balilla and Avanguardisti. The experience would prompt him to start the Nasik-based Bhonsala Military School in 1937 in order to form a Hindu nationalist youth militia. Both V.D. Savarkar, original Hindutva ideologue and president of the Hindu Mahasabha party, and M.S. Golwalkar, the second Sarsangchalak (supreme leader) of the RSS, had consistent links with the hard right in Italy and Germany. Savarkar would give a series of speeches in the late 1930s defending the Reich and its anti-Semitic policies which were covered in the Nazi daily Volkischer Beobachter. The newspapers Kesari and Marhabba in turn published features on the rise of fascism and imminent collapse of democratic societies.


10. See, for example, the secularism debates of the 1990s, in the wake of the political rise of the Hindu right in India and the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 in Bhargava (1998).

11. See Peter van der Veer (2001, pp. 145–50). Among other things, the science of race was an instrument of colonial demographics and the basis of a colonial statistical assertion that Indians were too racially diverse to form a nation.


13. For a good part, this casting of the Rg Veda as the original Aryan Bible untainted by Semitics also entailed issues of race and ethnicity that went in the direction of appropriating the Aryan discourse by jettisoning the Indian from it.


16. For a comprehensive and insightful account of a production of the “Bharat” imaginary as a “smooth” national space between 1858 and 1920, see Manu Goswami, Producing India. The idea of Akhand Bharat performs as a “deep structure” of mythic belonging, nostalgia, and resentment to interrogate the pragmatics of modern geo-politics. In the sense Goswami draws from Pierre Bourdieu, its construction involves a “historical labor of dehistoricization.” See Goswami (2004, pp. 16–20).

17. See, for instance, Romila Thapar, “Secularism, History, and Contemporary Politics in India” (Thapar 2007).


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