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Narendra Modi's Appropriation of Swami Vivekananda's Legacy: Similarities and differences of Vivekananda's Hinduism and Narendra Modi's Hindutva

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Narendra Modi's Appropriation of Swami Vivekananda's Legacy

- *Similarities and differences of Vivekananda's Hinduism and Narendra
Modi's Hindutva* -

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Contents

	page
Introduction	3
Chapter I Hindu Monk and Hindutva Politician	10
Chapter II Vivekananda's Hinduism and legacy	15
Chapter III Modi's Appropriation of Vivekananda's Legacy	22
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	35

Introduction

Charismatic figures, who have influenced common people's lives, have been subject of interest for centuries. Religious and political leaders are among them who use their influence to exert power over people. Often their methods differ. While religious leaders use religious and spiritual sensibility to further their mission, politicians entice people with the promise of material development and a good life. However, both politicians and religious leaders can change people's social behaviour, morals and self-awareness. This thesis focusses on two charismatic characters, who have influenced people's lives in India and have also made impact in the world: Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk of the 19th century, and the present Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. This thesis compares these two figures as Narendra Modi frequently invokes Vivekananda's ideas and legacy in his speeches and on social media

Evolution of Hinduism: A Brief Account

For understanding the term Hinduism, that is used in the thesis, is borrowed from the definition of Gavin Flood, who refers to Hinduism as a whole variety of practices and beliefs (Flood 2017:8). Subsequently, it is essential to understand that Hinduism as a term and as a world religion was created only since the nineteenth century by Hindu reformers and oriental scholars from the West. Hence in this thesis the word Hinduism is to be understood as a religion that builds on centuries of practices, beliefs and philosophical thinking of a community that worships a large pantheon of gods and goddesses and strives for understanding and comprehend the self and mankind.

Religion and Politics in India

The religious-philosophical-culture of India is a unique one, probably even dating back to the pre-Vedic era of the Indus valley civilisation of 3000 BCE. At the Mohenjo-Daro site, of the Indus valley civilization, a *Pashupati* seal was found which according to some can be interpreted as a proto-Shiva or Hindu deity. India's Hindu religious landscape is quite huge and there are many canons associated with it. A major canon has three books or three sources, which consists of the Upanishads, The Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras. Each of these books have extensive commentaries by different authors over time. Hindus in general

appreciate the Bhagavad Gita as a valuable book of instructions in life. The other two books are more of a philosophical nature.

Buddhism and Jainism preceded popular Hinduism in India as we know it nowadays. The Brahmanical religion gained in importance once Buddhism and Jainism went into decline. However old Vedic cults and different sectarian religions had yet to merge into a synthetic form (Bhattacharyya 1989:IV 49). The epic and Puranic period (500 BCE–500CE) in Indian history sees the traditions of Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism on the rise. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are the great heroic epics composed in this period. Devotion, *bhakti*, started to flourish because of the Puranas and poetic literature appears both in Sanskrit and in vernacular languages (Flood 2017:22). At the time Vivekananda was born in the 19th century, Hinduism was somewhat dormant. Whether centuries of Islamic rule was the cause of this may be further investigated.

A few introductory remarks on Hinduism and politics. While discussing Indian politics Kautilya and his book Arthashastra cannot be left unmentioned. Kautilya, probably born 375 BCE, wrote a treatise on the acquisition and preservation of land or the art of government. This includes politics, economy, military strategy but also method to kill hostile subjects and secret and despotic measures to collect money. This extensive book on polity and governance shows how developed Indian thinking was on the exertion of power, centuries before the Machiavelli of the West was born. Great monarchical dynasties like the Mauryas and the Guptas ruled a large part of India and ruled following Hindu traditions and Kautilya's methods until Islamic invaders entered India from the north-west in the 12th century. A crucial principle of Indian politics since ancient times has been the division of labour. The ruling power, Kshatriyas, needs the spiritual power, Brahmins, or priests, to conduct the rituals for the welfare of the nation and the ruler. The Vaishyas are the farmers and Shudras are the service providers of the three higher classes. In India this is called the varna system, which later gave birth to the hierarchical and occupational caste system. Great monarchical dynasties like the Mauryas and the Guptas in various parts of India ruled according to Hindu traditions and Kautilya's methods, before Islam invaders entered India.

Hinduism and social reforms in the 19th century

In the evolution of Hinduism the emergence of Neo-Vedanta is crucial and this term has been often used in relation to the subject at hand. Neo-Vedanta suggests that there is something

new about it. It is generally accepted that Vedanta is a school of thought that was established by the philosopher Shankara at the end of the eight and beginning of the ninth century CE. Shankara acted to counterbalance the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. Through his teaching and establishment of a monastic order he created a pan-Indian orthodox Hindu tradition. Hindu customs and belief became somewhat dormant due to the persistent Islamic invasions since the 12th century and subsequent establishment of Muslim rule in medieval India. Modern India came under the British colonial rule. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Hindu leaders found the time ripe to re-awaken Hindus and make them conscious about their heritage as well as to reform Hinduism in tune with the demand of modernity. It was Vivekananda who undertook this task and his philosophy for revitalization of Hinduism is called Neo-Vedanta.

Social reform movements either politically or religiously oriented, or both, occurred in India in the 19th century. Hindu reformers, including Swami Vivekananda, focussed on India's glorious past. Kulke and Rothermund voice the opinion that the Vedanta philosophy and Neo-Hinduism were vehicles for a political interpretation as the Vedanta concept of liberation could take the meaning of a national solidarity and political awakening to oust the British (Kulke & Rothermund 2016:233). To the nationalists, the Vedanta philosophy may have been an inspiration but Vedanta's aim was and is the liberation of the soul and not of the nation. Vivekananda's Karma-yoga was linked to the concept of liberation and could be linked to the nation since it was more applicable and set down a path of unselfish actions for right conduct. This detached action fitted the Indian nationalists well and was promoted by Vivekananda at the same time (Kulke and Rothermund 2016:233). The teachings of Vivekananda, as a religious reformer, made it possible for Hindus to think of India's past with pride. Hinduism had been transported from the realm of superstition to a national pride.

In the second half of the 19th century a political awaking was going on in India. A political awakening of the elite and the educated. Christian missionaries were active in India converting low cast Hindu to Christians. The question is whether these elements may have been direct or indirect the cause for social reforms or preparing for a revival of Hinduism. By the end of the 19th century some religious movements in British India such as the Bengal movement Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj were offering a new sense of identity to the Hindus and were campaigning for social reforms (Kulke and Rothermund 2010:231). The Arya Samaj was against the caste system and stimulated modern English education. The Brahma Samaj, was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774 -1833) and the father of the

later famous poet Tagore also participated in the movement. The movement over time transformed much more towards a religious movement under Keshab Chander Sen (1838-1884). The Brahmo Samaj's objectives were to bring religion to the masses. Translating the Vedas and Upanishads in Bengali helped to achieve that goal. It is remarkable to see that through Vivekananda the ambition to change social circumstances in British India also came from a religious corner. The Brahmo Samaj took care to translate Hindu scriptures in local languages. At the same time Vivekananda lectured and wrote books, thus directly educating the masses. But more were active in the field and not all aiming at the same goal. Bal Gangadhar Tilak though an advocate of the Hindu Vedanta philosophy, strongly believed in orthodox Hindu rituals. Tilak, a social reformer and nationalist, however opposed a Bill (1890 Age of Consent Bill) to raise the age from which girls could marry from 10 to 12.

Vivekananda's philosophy appealed to the educated upper and middle class Hindus and rekindled the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Most important for India's political history, was the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Liberal nationalists and extremists within the Congress differed in their outlook towards British colonial power. The liberals worked within the frames of the British and the nationalists perceived any change in legislation as a way of further strengthening restraints. The extremists were of the opinion that India as a nation had existed since ancient times and merely had to be awakened again to its glorious past (Kulke and Rothermund 2016:233).

Vivekananda's Contributions

Vivekananda's Neo-Hinduism influenced Hindus re-awakening them to take pride in the rich heritage of India. He said that "India had lost faith, *shraddha*, and therefore has gone to ruin" (Vivekananda 1976:570). His advice was to have first faith in ourselves. He draws a line to English education saying that Indians have only learned weakness as a conquered race. The ancestors of the English are learned in school, but the Indians are unaware of India's history (Vivekananda 1976:471). The Indus Valley Civilizations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, from around 2500 BC, however testify to India's glorious past (Kulke and Rothermund 2016:1).

According to Dalton the contribution of Vivekananda as a political thinker, was his synthesis of different nineteenth-century trends that had started revitalizing Hinduism (Dalton 1965:48). While recognizing Vivekananda's contributions, reformers like Keshub Chandra Sen,

Debendranath Tagore, Rammohun Roy and others need to be mentioned, who preceded Vivekananda and partly paved the way for his mission. Although the teachings of Vivekananda are religious in nature, the message of freedom and liberation of the soul resonates a political and social liberty akin to Western thought (Dalton 1965:72). It is known that the ideas about freedom of the British sociologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer, appealed to Vivekananda. Spencer's freedom saw "governments as a threat to individual liberty", Vivekananda framed freedom in a religious manner (Dalton 1965:73).

All this happened at the end of the nineteenth century when India was still under colonial rule. Christian missionaries had little respect for the Hindu religion which they saw as pagan. The British government kept a close eye on whether the religious message of Vivekananda and other religious organisations expanded their reach to an independent India (Rolland 1930:501). However British scholars, in the mid-19th century, took an interest in Hinduism and in the heritage of India and made attempts to search for links between Greek, Latin, Hebrew and ancient Indian languages (James 2001:279). A sense of the greatness of India's past, may have been strengthened when scholars like Max Muller and others began to translate and write about Sanskrit texts. Ever since the British had tightened their grip on India after the 1857 revolt, missionary campaigns were set up from England to convert the heathen Indians to Christianity. For Christianity, it had the mandate to bring civilisation. Thus the church and the army, the Bible and the gun, worked hand in hand to certain extent. There was a general idea that British culture could elevate the Indian. Yet others like Thackeray¹ were sceptical and thought that the virtues of British society were only possible through Protestantism and liberalism (James 2001:280). It is interesting to see how Vivekananda, in later years, turned this notion upside down.

Narendra Modi: Hindu Nationalist Legacy

I have chosen the present Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, who frequently refers to Vivekananda in his speeches and on social media, to investigate and make a comparison with Vivekananda. The comparison between the two, though set a century apart, still has meaning. Narendra Modi operates in an independent India roughly from the end of the twentieth century up to the present day. Narendra Modi is the present leader of this Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is the political affiliate of the RSS, the fountainhead of Hindutva/Hindu

¹ W.M. Thackeray (1811-1863) was a British novelist, born in India by British parents.

nationalism. The RSS preaches that India is a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) and the BJP subscribes to a political ideology of Hindu extremism. The origin of the BJP is found in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) a political party that was established in 1951 by S.P. Mukherjee.² After decennia of Government rule by one political party i.e. the Indian Congress Party, at the end of the 1970s new political trends caused new parties were formed and coalition Governments, took shape. Religious identity became important in politics revealing majorities and minorities. The last Indian Government of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty was by Rajiv Gandhi from 1984 until 1989. Rajiv's Gandhi's Government opened the door of a mosque in Ayodhya for Hindu worshippers. This act was to have grave consequences in later years. The 1980s and 1990s witnesses some turmoil with Pakistan about Kashmir. The 1989 general elections in India saw the end of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty of politicians. During the 1989 elections influential groups at the state level had penetrated the national government (Bose and Jalal 2004:188). Ideals of secularism and socialism as promoted right after independence by Prime Minister Nehru, lost their appeal. The Indian Congress Party turned its focus to a political majoritarianism. This however backfired and paved the way for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP and other Hindu ideological parties. The BJP ruled New Delhi from 1998 to 2004 after winning elections with the support of Indian right-wing nationalist organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). This was a period of coalition government, led by a moderate BJP leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Narendra Modi started his career as a member of the RSS and was a *pracharak* (organiser). Later he became the General Secretary of the BJP in 1998. The star of Modi was certainly on the rise when he became Chief Minister of the State Gujarat in 2001. After the BJP won elections since 2014, Narendra Modi has held the post of Prime Minister until now.

Vivekananda has been projected as a role model by the RSS because of his invocation of Hinduism and nationalism. Modi, as a Hindu nationalist, claims that he has been inspired by Vivekananda and a follower of his legacy and pays symbolic homage in public and glorifies his ideals and invokes him during elections campaign.

² S.P. Mukherjee (1901-1953) was an Indian politician who was India's first minister for Industry in the Nehru government.

Research question

The main question of this thesis is: Why does the politician Narendra Modi claim to follow/represent in the tradition of Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk and to what extent this claim is genuine?

Subquestions

What are the similarities and differences between Vivekananda's Hinduism and Modi's Hindutva?

How does Modi project himself in public sphere as the follower of Vivekananda and how does it help him to achieve his objectives?

Hypothesis

There is a contradiction between Vivekananda's Hinduism and Narendra Modi's Hindutva. Modi appropriates Vivekananda's legacy for the promotion of Hindutva ideology and his own image-making and political benefits. Vivekananda's mission was to re-vitalize Hinduism with a focus on Neo-Vedanta which does not approve politics of exclusion as represented in Hindutva.

Methodology

This thesis adopts historical and analytical methods. It makes a comparative analysis of the ideas and approach of Vivekananda and Modi towards religion and politics. Since the thesis deals with two characters who lived a century apart, their lifestyle will not be discussed. However, the political environment is relevant and will be analysed. .

For the methodology secondary sources in English have been used. The Primary sources used are: Sanskrit and Hindi texts, writings and speeches, newspapers, magazines, online websites and twitters accounts. The secondary sources consist of books and journal articles published in English. Reference to these secondary and primary sources are mentioned directly in the text. Occasional footnotes are used to clarify foreign words or provide background information. Some Sanskrit texts may illustrate or substantiate opinions. Since the thesis deals

with two characters who lived a century apart, their lifestyle will not be discussed. However, the political environment is relevant and will be analysed. After the introduction the thesis contains the following chapters, Hindu monk and Hindutva politician, Vivekananda's Hinduism and legacy, Modi's appropriation of Vivekananda's legacy and conclusions. A bibliography completes this thesis. The next chapter provides a first portraiture of Vivekananda and Narendra Modi.

Chapterisation

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Hindu Monk and Hindutva Politician: In this chapter some books and articles on Vivekananda and Modi will be referred to and critically reviewed to describe and analyse the two figures to make a distinction between a Hindu monk and a Hindutva politician.
- Chapter 2: Vivekananda's Hinduism or legacy: This chapter along with a short biographical sketch of Vivekananda, will discuss and analyse some of the core elements of Vivekananda's Hinduism.
- Chapter 3: Modi's Appropriation of Vivekananda's Legacy: This chapter will first make brief bio-note with his involvement in Hindutva politics. Then it will discuss how he selectively borrows and represents some of Vivekananda's ideals to promote Hindutva politics as well as his own branding as the inheritor of Vivekananda's legacy.
- Conclusions

Chapter I: Hindu Monk and Hindutva Politician

The tantalizing question of this thesis is, why is Modi projecting himself to follow in Vivekananda's footsteps? In order to arrive at a meaningful discussion and to answer that question, this chapter looks into the works of some authors, their statements and opinions about Vivekananda and Modi. Many authors have written about Vivekananda and he himself also wrote a great number of books. It will be useful to analyse these works on Vivekananda and Modi to make a distinction between a Hindu monk and a Hindutva politician.

A thorough account of the life and teachings of Vivekananda is written by the French historian and essayist Romain Rolland (1866-1944). Romain Rolland received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915. In 1930 he wrote essays in French about Vivekananda whose Vedanta philosophy he admired. These essays were then translated into English by E.F. Malcolm-Smith in 1931 for the book "The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel". For Modi a biography is available by Andy Marino, a British writer. The book is not a hagiography but a political biography with the title "Narendra Modi: a Political Biography" (Marino:2014). Marino had unrestricted access to Modi in 2014 at the time of writing the biography, which was unique for a foreign author. He interviewed Modi at a time when he was not yet elected as prime minister but campaigning for the State Gujarat elections.

Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda was born as Narendranath Datta in the State of Bengal in India in 1863 on the auspicious day of the Hindu festival Makar Sankranti (Nikhilananda 1971:1). He was born in a traditional Hindu family of which his father was a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court (Baier 2019:231). Living the life of a monk was not unknown within his family since his grandfather, a Sanskrit scholar, renounced the world and became a monk (Nikhilananda 1971:3). Bhubaneswari Devi, the mother of Narendranath, was a devout Hindu. For his education, Narendranath went to the Calcutta metropolitan School and the Presidency College in Calcutta. India had a population of some 200 million at the time of the 1881 Census. The majority of the population was illiterate. Narendranath was able to get an education mainly because he was born into a good and relatively wealthy family. Education was a privilege for a long time, since even at the time of independence in 1947, India's literacy rate was only 14%, with some variations in the different states (Shah 2013:12). His education included Indian and Western philosophy. After his formal education he joined several social movements to finally end up with his spiritual master and mystic Ramakrishna whom he first met in 1881. Ramakrishna was a priest at the Hindu Kali temple in Dakshineshvar situated on the outskirts of Calcutta. It was this meeting that ultimately changed his life and outlook although the two were only some five years in each other's company. By this time Vivekananda had received the ochre monk robe from Ramakrishna, but it was only after his death that he decided to take proper monastic vows. He took the name Vivekananda in 1893 before leaving for America (Rolland 1930:235).

Vivekananda's universal message

After travelling through India for several years, doubting what his mission in life was, it was only in 1893 that he decided to attend the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in the United States uninvited. Some 8000 people had gathered from all over the world and from all sorts of religions. At the opening of the conference on September 11, 1898 Vivekananda speech was "like a tongue of flame", stressing the unity of the different religious paths and Hinduism as the mother of all (Rolland 1931:43). Vivekananda's opening address at the conference has become legendary. Opening with the words "Brothers and Sisters of America" resulted in a two-minute applause. He quoted from the Bhagavad Gita saying that different streams have different origins but all merge their teaching (their water) in the sea. They appear to be different but all lead to God (Tharoor 2018:22). This teaching is found in the Bhagavad Gita chapter 4, verse 11. The Bhagavad Gita is a 700-verses Hindu scripture teaching morals and the duty of men. Vivekananda set out to promote Hindu philosophy and a practical Yoga in The United States. His wisdom and message of universal religion was highly praised in the newspapers at the time. In his speeches he uplifted Hinduism and Hindu philosophy to a world religion of standing. He spoke of religious tolerance and stressed that Hindus worship the same God as the Christians (Vivekananda 1962:1605). His success at the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago, resonated in India when he returned. All of a sudden the monk of Bengal was famous.

Four yoga's and the soul

Vivekananda introduced scientific and analytical thinking in religious spirituality and at the same time creating a Neo-Hindu awareness (Halbfass 1988:226). In this way he could connect the East and West. However science had not the main interest of Vivekananda. Ethics, social uplift and national identity interpreted through the religious and spiritual teachings of Hinduism was what he valued (Halbfass 1988:234). According to Halbfass nationalism if it goes hand in hand with intolerance was rejected by Vivekananda (Halbfass 1988:232). His unique teachings proclaimed that the soul of man is divine and one in all, that God is without divisions (non-dual) and the oneness of religious paths (Adiswarananda 2006:vii). Vivekananda explains that the methods of Hinduism are linked to psychology and physiology that have been experimented for centuries. It requires a spiritual discipline that is described in various books. Contrary to what the West believes, Vivekananda maintains that the spirit (soul) is not equal to intelligence (Roland 1930:381). Any religion starts with the struggle to

overcome and understand the limitations of the senses (Roland 1930:427). The reality behind the senses must be sought after. Thus a spiritual quest for the ultimate truth and service to society may be seen as the basis teachings of Vivekananda. Vivekananda explained four yoga's to be conducive to understanding reality. These are paths along the way of action, *karma*, or devotion, *bhakti*, knowledge, *jnana*, and the royal path, *raja-yoga*. Roland writes that the principle of service was essential in the teachings of Vivekananda (Roland 1930:389). In *karma-yoga* a spiritual path is set out to the practitioner that includes selfless service to society. His message was of religious tolerance and stressed that the Hindus worship the same God as the Christians (Vivekananda 1962:1605).

Caste, social service and politics

Of social ethics and Indian morality Vivekananda maintained that the caste system has nothing to do with religion. He advised parents to bring up their children to detest the institution of caste (Tharoor 2018:75). A spiritual quest for the ultimate truth and service to society may be seen as the basis teachings of Vivekananda. Rolland elaborates that Vivekananda stimulated the youth with words: "Gird up your loins, my boys! The hope lies in you" (Rolland 1930:287). When a student once said that the teachings of liberation in Vedanta had done harm to India, Vivekananda became extremely angry and said that this way of thinking really undermines the idea of service, *seva*, to one's fellow man (Roland 1930:390). He condemns bad politics in the words "that some in the name of politics rob us and fatten themselves" (Vivekananda 1962:2688). Adiswarananda quotes Vivekananda saying that Asia speaks of religion and Europe has the mouth full of politics (Adiswarananda 2006:125).

Narendra Modi and the RSS

Narendra Damodardas Modi is an Indian politician who was born in 1950 and in time rose to the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party. From the Gujarat University he completed an MA degree in political science. According to Ian Hall, Modi was a member of the RSS since his childhood (Hall 2017:124). Little is known about Modi's years between the age of 17 to 19. There is some information that he walked a lot. Even today Modi does not clarify his wandering activities during that period (Marino 2014:31). Was this the time when he was building up contacts with the RSS?

The RSS is a volunteer organization of Hindu nationalists, which was founded in 1925 in Nagpur, following V.D. Savarkar's ideology of Hindutva. The original ideal of the RSS was to build India as a Hindu nation by recruiting young men and train them regularly in *shakas* (RSS meetings). Through the RSS, Modi was influenced by the Hindu nationalist political philosophy as propagated by Savarkar and the RSS. The RSS has always sought to engage in politics. The journalist K.R. Malkani, wrote this way back in 1949 (Jaffrelot 2007:175). For the RSS, India is Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu Nation) and it strives for a political Hinduism, it instructs its followers that non-Hindus like Muslims and Christians are enemies of the Hindu nation (Kanungo 2002:8).

The Indian Express calls Modi an RSS-*pracharak*, i.e. a missionary or recruiter from the Indian nationalist paramilitary volunteer organization RSS. The RSS was founded in 1925 as an independent movement. Since 1951, not long after the independence of India, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was the political arm of the right-wing RSS. Over time the BJS merged with several other organizations and eventually became Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP was in fact created in 1980 with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as party president. Under Vajpayee the BJP grew in popularity mainly due to economic growth of the country and a rising middle-class. In the 1980s, Modi travelled around the Gujarat State as an RSS-*pracharak* promoting the RSS organization (Marino 2014:55).

Modi and Activism

Modi was no stranger to activism since he went on several tours and in 1989 on a tour to outlaw the liquor mafia in the city of Ahmedabad. In the same year he also took a long march across India, called the Lok Shakti Rath Yatra. A power to the people through this march. In 2002 riots between Hindus and Muslim took place in Gujarat when Modi was the Chief Minister of the province. In the riots, thousand Muslims got killed. Modi is being suspected of not interfering or protecting people during the 2002 riots. Up to this day these riots remain an unsolved issue and despite Indian Supreme Court's clearance there remains some stain on Modi's reputation. A BBC documentary of 2023 retells this story and shows interviews with Modi and his response. In the view of the BBC, Modi was responsible for impunity that took place and used it for political gains. What the BBC said in the documentary was not new. New however was the footage of riots and police officers just standing by, plus Modi campaigning and denying facts in his Hindi speeches.

Modi and Vivekananda

It is known that Modi visited Vivekananda's organization called the Ramakrishna Mission in 1968 when he was 18 years old (Marino 2014:31). Andy Marino, his biographer, maintains that Modi was sincere in his admiration for Vivekananda. Yet Modi, according to his biographer, stated that he himself is not religious and does not believe in rituals (Marino 2014:201). When Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat his speeches did not carry many references to Vivekananda. Only when the position of Prime Minister of India became a serious option did Modi increasingly refer to Vivekananda (Hall 2017:124). It was an intellectual respect for Vivekananda, of whom Modi believes he was a non-sectarian person (Marino 2014:19). Modi claims that Vivekananda strived for a strong and developed India and that the speeches and the life of Vivekananda had a great influence on his own mind (TimesNow:17-9-2022). On many occasions and celebrations Modi has been paying a tribute to Vivekananda. This tribute is especially shaped because, since the year 1985, January 12th, the birthday of Vivekananda, is celebrated as National Youth Day. It was however the Indian Government under the Congress Party that established this as a national day. So Modi can't take the credits for that.

On some occasions people around Modi create a hype of Vivekananda-Modi connection. Thus a member of the Indian Parliament of Modi's BJP, Saumitra Khan, started a controversy in the State of Bengal by stating that Modi is the reincarnation of Swami Vivekananda in a new form (IndiaTV:Januay13, 2023). The statement was made to compare Modi and Vivekananda in serving the country. The result is a huge discussion on social media whether this can be claimed or not. The next chapter investigates the legacy of Vivekananda and what his Hinduism entails.

Chapter II: Vivekananda's Hinduism and Legacy

To an average European in Victorian Europe it was impossible to think that India could influence the West and Western civilization. Indians were considered backward, lazy and incapable of profound thinking. This bias was formed through English writers. Governor-

General Hastings wrote in the beginning of the 19th century that the Hindu was limited to animal functions with an intellect no better than a dog or monkey (Majumdar 1963:1).

It is presently accepted that India had trade contacts by land and sea with the West perhaps as far back as 2000 BC. Vedic (Indian) culture made its influence in Western Asia and Majumdar and others maintains that Pythagorean philosophy (500 BC) was heavily influenced by the *Sankhya* philosophy of India (Majumdar 1963:5, Garbe 1894:182).

Vivekananda presented India's Hinduism as spiritually superior to the West and revised Hindu masculinity in strength and assertiveness (Roy and Hammers 2014:548). He did so to counterbalance the rhetoric of the British colonial ruler who presented the Indian male as effeminate and passive. Roy and Hammer are of opinion that Vivekananda's remasculinization reinforced feelings of nationalism thus challenging colonial rule (Roy and Hammers 2014:547). The fact that the West and the British were materially superior was no point of discussion. It was Vivekananda who challenged the ethical and moral positioning of the West in their pursuit of expansion. Nonetheless this happened only after Vivekananda himself had gone through a period of doubt about his mission in life and after having travelled the whole of India meeting with scholars, Muslims, ordinary people and dignitaries.

Vivekananda's presence and speeches at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago marked the beginning of his systematic teachings of Hinduism or Neo-Vedanta. His speeches made such a huge impact that he was even offered a chair in Eastern Philosophy at Harvard University (Majumdar 1963:103). These were the first signs that the West had embraced the idea that an Indian monk and India had something to say. On Hinduism Vivekananda said that Hindus believe in worshipping God for God's sake and not because we can ask him what we want (Vivekananda 1989:3793). In a speech delivered in the USA in Memphis in 1894 Vivekananda explains that for Hindus God is not a king in a faraway corner. Why should we teach that God is a distant figure when human's real nature and immortal principle is God (Vivekananda 1989:3795)?

Elaborating this argument, Vivekananda related this to Christianity saying that when Adam fell, he fell from his state of purity and purity is our nature and to regain that state is the goal of all religions. In a nutshell Vivekananda explains here the essence of the Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism. Men's soul is like a diamond that needs to be polished to regain its diamond nature. Generally Indian religious thought and philosophy is referred to as Hinduism. This term is however not without some discussion. For Hindu may refer to a region around the river Indus, a culture established by people, a religion practised by the

people or the people of a nation (Sharma 2002:29). It was nevertheless the pluralism of Vivekananda that led him to harmonise the teaching of Buddhism, Christianity and of the Prophet Muhammed under his umbrella of Neo-Vedanta or a revitalized Hinduism (Beckerlegge 2006:130). He was never tired to explain his message that “all religions were but paths that lead to the same goal“ (Chandrakantha 2015:110). Vivekananda referred thus to the ancient Vedic text “Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti” (Rigveda 1.164.46), meaning “Truth is one, the wise speak of it in many ways”.³

Vivekananda’s Philosophy: Vedanta

A few words to explain the Vedanta philosophy within Hinduism. Veda is a Sanskrit word meaning knowledge and anta means the end. Thus Vedanta claims to present the end to knowing or knowledge. In the Indian tradition hymns were passed on orally from generation to generation among the priestly class and later put to manuscripts in what is called the Vedas. This Vedic literature consist of four groups of books i.e. the Rig-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda and the Atharva-Veda. Each of these book had sub-parts known as the Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. The Brahmanas are probably the earliest of Indian or Vedic literature (Goodall 2001: x). These early hymns are polytheistic by nature containing a large number of gods often deities of nature like Agni (fire), Vayu (wind), Ushas (dawn) and others. The Upanishads are the last phase of Indian philosophical thought, seeking knowledge and to understand the universe, the divine (God) and man. To some authors, like professor Franklin Edgerton⁴, the quest for knowledge was the quest for power, since knowledge is power (Goodall 2001:xv). The Upanishad are nevertheless sublime in their conception of God and the divine, but often cryptic in their formulation. To understand these sublime ancient texts it needed a great commentator to understand them. It was Shankara in the 8th century CE who wrote several commentaries, *bhashyas*, on the ancient texts to formulate a monistic non-dual philosophy called Advaita Vedanta. According to Vivekananda Shankara revived and rationalized the Vedanta philosophy because he too acknowledges the teachings in the Upanishads to be often very obscure (Vivekananda 1989:733). It is these teaching of Vedanta or Hinduism, that Vivekananda brought to the attention of the people in the West and in India. Some authors describe Vivekananda’s philosophy therefore as Neo-Vedanta. The Vedanta teaching of Shankara, based on the Vedas (Upanishads), was overgrown with Hindu rituals.

³ एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

⁴ Professor F. Edgerton (1885-1963) was a Sanskrit scholar at Yale University.

But Vivekananda unlatched again the meaning of the Vedic Upanishads, its philosophy and its practise. Thus, he wrote (in 1895) his famous book on Raja Yoga. Raja Yoga, the new name he had constructed for the practise of the Vedanta philosophy.

Service to society and social reform

The philosophy of service, *seva*, to one's fellow man and to mankind, is prominent in Hinduism and Vivekananda too spoke many times about the importance of selfless service to others. During his stay in the USA Vivekananda explained that "*doing good to others out of compassion is good, but the service to all beings in the spirit of God is better*" (Vivekananda 1989:2545). Some writers say that this is the basic teachings of Vivekananda and that he saw India's social reform, or social service "as a part of religious worship" (Chandrakantha 2015:107). The monk tradition of the Rama Krishna Mission that he started was not to live a detached life in seclusion but a life with service to society (Chandrakantha 2015:111). This was certainly breaking away from the traditional path of renunciation that Hindu monks, *sannyasins*, were supposed to follow. Vivekananda wanted his Rama Krishna Order monks to promote education, set up hospitals, schools, dispensaries and other institutions to uplift the poor and downtrodden masses of India (Flood 2017:258). He gave a new definition to the practise of *sannyasa*, that differs from the one established by Shankara in the 8th century CE. The education of women had Vivekananda's special attention. Education was until then only possible for the elite.

In 1895 Vivekananda met Margareth Elisabeth Noble, an Irish teacher, in London. After becoming the follower of Vivekananda and coming to India, Margareth Elisabeth Noble raised money and opened a school in Calcutta for girls who were excluded from basic education. Is this how Vivekananda's social reforms took place? Margareth Noble later became known as Sister Nivedita. The Ramakrishna Mission opened in the following years many more schools and colleges in India. Vivekananda thought that social reforms were not the pressing problem of India. An urgent matter was the regeneration of the national culture (Baier 2019:236)). India needs first of all a national self-confidence. And religion in his words has to be practical in helping the people who are ill or have hunger. In Vivekananda words: "*I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas*" (Adiswarananda 2006:226). Yet aid and education programmes are the tools that Vivekananda used. His religion was a practical religion. But by saying that aid and education is necessary, is that enough to call his version of religion to have a social aspect?

On the reform of the caste system Vivekananda was ambiguous. He does not want any reformation. He says: “*our institutions are on the whole the most moral and the most godly and our institutions are, in their plan and purpose, best suited to make mankind happy*”. V.A. van Bijlert in his book “Vedantic Hinduism in Colonial Bengal”, argues that Vivekananda must refer here to the caste system (Bijlert 2020:148). If Vivekananda does not want to change the caste system or for that matter the position of the untouchables or of woman, what remains than of a social reform? And how does this relate to Sister Nivedita setting up schools for girls. Vivekananda advocated a type of Hinduism that says that all beings have a divine nature regardless of social status (Flood 2017:258). But again my question, is this enough to lay the foundation for social equality and social reforms? Is it enough to just say that all humans are equal, or does it need some action to realise this equality? Still, helping the poor was his strong belief. “*Worship Shiva in the poor, the sick and the feeble*” were his words after his visit to the USA and return to India (Rolland 1930:317). The Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service established in 1900 in Varanasi, is devoted mainly to educate the poor. There are no records of Vivekananda advocating social changes like socialism or anarchism in Indian society. Baier mentions that Vivekananda feared that a social revolution would empower the Hindu lowest class, *shudras*, to gain dominance without losing their class characteristics (Baier 2019:231). Which he apparently saw as unwanted. Chandrakantha argues in his study on the role of Vivekananda in Social Reforms, that the social status of women in India was very poor and that Vivekananda was concerned about that (Chandrakantha 2015:109). Vivekananda wanted a new social order and a new society with the best spiritual traditions and the latest achievements in technology and science combined. Was patriotism the path to that goal?

Patriotism

The Neo-Hinduism of Vivekananda did inspire revolutionary nationalists into a political interpretation to be liberated from the British. Action as a sacrifice, or Karma-yoga, of Vivekananda stimulated this nationalism and patriotism (Kulke and Rothermund 2016:234). Hindu thought had been rehabilitated by Vivekananda, thus creating a pride and patriotism that was eagerly exploited by Gopal Krishna Gokhale and others. At times Vivekananda felt that some were complaining to him about too much teachings on philosophy and Vedanta. But then he kept referring to the task lay ahead for India. What was needed in his words were “muscles of iron and nerves of steel” and he pointed to the millions that were starving at the time. When one understands that misery and you have forgotten your heritage, that is the first

step to become a patriot, he said (Rolland 1930:320). On other occasions Vivekananda was more critical about patriotism and said that “patriotism is a phase of a profession of quasi-religious faith” (Rolland 1930:445).

At the start of the 20th century the British Government were apprehensive about social movement and also kept a close watch over religious organizations including the movement started by Vivekananda. Yet Vivekananda’s teaching may have materially contributed to feelings of patriotism and ambitions of independence. The great fighter for an independent India, Mohandas Gandhi,⁵ is known to have said that the books of Vivekananda had aided to his patriotism (Rolland 1930:502). To overcome weakness was one of the first steps that Indians had to take. The weakness that the British had labelled on them. To be a master spiritually, needed first to create “physically strong and virile bodies” (Roy and Hammers 2014:552). Roy and Hammers argue that the path to an independent India and ultimate salvation was through a patriotic and religious duty (Roy and Hammers 2014:552).

Global spread/ outreach

The impact of the message Vivekananda brought to the USA in 1893 may be hard to grasp in our present age of rapid exchange of information around the world. International networks at the time worked on the basis of writings, mobility was slow and knowledge and research was not readily available since digital information or the internet was still to be invented. Malcolm-Smith, the translator of Romain Rolland’s book on Vivekananda, acknowledges in 1930 in her introduction, that too little is known of Indian thought in the West and she expresses the hope that through her translation one may discover that “the great thinkers of the earth are essentially brothers” (Rolland 1930:vi). It would need a full research to find out how ready the USA was for the message for Vivekananda. There were however some Americans like Emerson and Thoreau who were publishing philosophical thoughts of Indian origin from 1830 onwards (Rolland 1930:267). Ralph Waldo Emerson⁶ referred to Hindu religious texts in an 1838 lecture at the University of Harvard. He mentioned the belief in a divine soul that created some scandal (Rolland 1930:267). In later years Walt Whitman wrote a poem called “Leaves of Grass” in which he incorporated Hindu thinking and realism which

⁵ Gandhi 1869-1948.

⁶ R.W. Emerson 1803-1882.

poem Vivekananda may have read in later years. These were the pioneers in the USA that prepared the ground.

From his openings speech at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago onwards Vivekananda had started to deliver lectures. Men and women came to him from all parts of the USA. From salons, universities, Christians, agnostics and free thinkers. Soon Vivekananda found out that very few of his rich followers understood what the real meaning of his message was. They were seeing him as a novelty from India (Nikhilananda 1971:150). He wanted to break away from that and teach those who were really interested, and so he did. After Romain Rolland published his book on Vivekananda in 1930 and it was translated into English in 1931, we see a renewed interest in Vivekananda and his teachings. First of all because Romain Rolland was a Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1915 and secondly because of the content of the book i.e. the teachings of Vivekananda titled as “The Universal Gospel”. It is 1930 when a lengthy article about Vivekananda and his teachings appears in a Dutch newspaper.⁷ In 1933 in the Dutch Indies, Semarang, a lecture was given by a Dutch pastor H. Jansen, about the teachings of Vivekananda. The theme of the lecture was “a universal religion”.⁸ A long article in 1933 about the teachings of Vivekananda again in another Dutch newspaper.⁹ The translation of the book of Romain Rolland about Vivekananda may have triggered these lectures. And still later an announcement in a 1963 Dutch newspaper about Vivekananda’s 100th anniversary commemoration and lectures in 1963.¹⁰ In recent decades little attention has been paid to Vivekananda’s heritage and legacy until in India a politician named Narendra Modi reiterates the importance of his teachings. The next chapter deals with this Narendra Modi as a follower of Vivekananda.

⁷ Het Vaderland, newspaper December 28, 1930.

⁸ Baiermotief, newspaper April 12, 1933.

⁹ Het Parool, newspaper, September 14, 1933.

¹⁰ Het Parool newspaper: June, 20, 1963

Chapter III: Modi's Appropriation of Vivekananda's Legacy

Modi and the RSS

Unlike Swami Vivekananda, the 19th century Hindu monk, politician Narendra Modi was born in 20th century independent India. Different from Vivekananda, who awakened Hindu consciousness through the philosophy of Neo-Vedanta and reformed Hinduism by preaching social equality and prioritising seva (service), Modi believes and practises political Hinduism (Hindutva) which lacks the deeper religious concerns of Vivekananda. Modi's biographer Marino writes that Modi is at the same time a complex and simple but multi-layered person (Marino 2014:6). This may mean that what is seen on the surface or through grooved habits, does not reflect Modi's underlying personality. But it is still too early for conclusions and therefore we are going to take a closer look at Modi, his actions and his beliefs.

Modi's true legacy: Hindutva and the RSS

It has been mentioned before that little is known about Modi's early years and he is not very communicative about it. What is known is that Modi attended youth meetings of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Marino 2014:24). The RSS has a Hindu-nationalistic ideology with a paramilitary organization. Because of his early connection with the RSS, Modi is familiar with its ideas and must have appreciated the ideas of Hindu nationalists like Savarkar, Golwalkar and others. As Chief minister of Gujarat Modi spoke of political heroes like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Gandhi as persons who had engaged in hard confrontations with Pakistan or with the British as in Gandhi's case.

Savarkar, the author of the book *Hindutva*, published in 1923, describes "Hindu-ness" or what it is to be a Hindu and advocates a Hindu nation state, *Hindu Rashtra*, or Hindu polity. About Christians and Muslims Sarvarkar was very clear saying that "Muslims and Christians can call India their fatherland, *pitribhumi*, but never their holy land, *punyabhumi*" (Price 2015:29). This kind of thinking springs from the Hindutva ideology, also adopted by the RSS, that India is basically a Hindu nation, *rashtra*. Such ideology sets minority groups apart and inherently marginalizes them. As recent as 2015 Modi praises in his book *Jyotipunj*, the founder of the RSS, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (Modi 2015:12). The book is a further

glorification of prominent RSS members. A guiding principle of the RSS is given in the book in the Sanskrit text “Rashtraya Swaha, Rashtraya Idam Na Mama”, meaning “sacrifice for the nation, I have no existence beyond the nation”.¹¹ The RSS and Modi encourages Hindu-people to be patriotic and work for the welfare of the nation (fig.1).

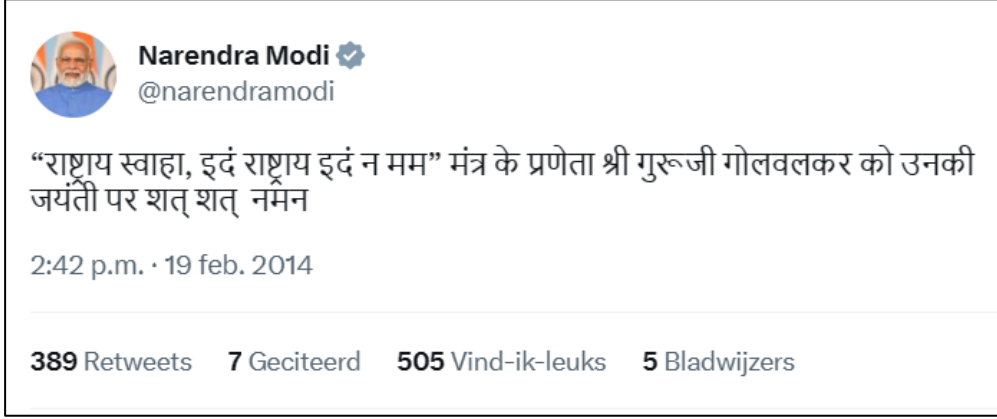


Fig. 1: Modi salutes Golwalkar of the RSS in 2014 and quotes the RSS slogan: “sacrifice for the nation, I have no existence beyond the nation”. Source: twitter @narendramodi

Modi adds that he considers himself a *swyamsevak* or RSS-volunteer (Modi 2015:24). The training of young men is crucial within the RSS. A deliberate policy is to invest in young adults and not to engage the higher-age groups (Kanungo 2002:71). Modi must have been at the right age when he was able to join the RSS. In the training of the youth a para-military approach is taken. Boys assemble in the morning at a meeting, *shaka*, in rows before a flag staff and next the *bhagwa dhvaj* flag is risen, with salutations to the flag. This saffron coloured flag served the glorious Hindu Maratha dynasty of the 17th century and is now adopted by the RSS. After raising the flag, the youngsters assemble in different groups for physical training and yoga exercises. The uniforms that RSS member wear, while wielding a stick, is modelled on Mussolini’s black-shirts (Price 2015:26). Defence games are played to make the youth more brave and courageous (Kanungo 2002:71). The RSS uses Hindu-culture to get to the hearts of the people in which mass prayers sports and games are the instruments. Promoting a Hindu nation, *Hindu Rashtra*, arouses suspicion about the RSS not to care for other minorities. It is nevertheless this RSS that the present Prime Minister on India, Modi, openly supports and sometimes attends meetings (fig. 2).

¹¹ Sanskrit text: राष्ट्राय स्वाहा, इदं राष्ट्राय इदं न मम



Fig. 2: Modi attending an RSS meeting. Source: www.huffpost.com

Hinduism

As a practitioner of a political Hinduism, Modi uses many Hindu practises and symbols as he needs to draw support from Hindu population. Hence Modi has fallen for a rather practical Hinduism like Yoga. He publicly promotes Yoga and encourages the youth to practise. Modi himself stands up early in the morning to perform yogic exercises claiming it gives him stamina (Marino 2014:90). Modi has also been successful in convincing the United Nations to adopt June 21 as the International Yoga Day. Addressing the United Nations in 2014 Modi, proposed an annual International Yoga day on June 21st. since it is the longest day of the year for the Northern hemisphere. Following this suggestion, the UN adopted a draft resolution to that effect. On the 21st. of June 2015 the first International Yoga day was held led by Modi in India (fig. 3). It is this kind of Hinduism that Modi promotes. That is a modern, yet ancient faith that includes practises in a sphere of beliefs and philosophy that is “vast and tolerant” (Marino 2014:201). This achievement prompts Modi to project himself to be the inheritor of Vivekananda’s legacy.



Fig. 3: First International Yoga day in 2015. Source: <https://time.com>

Modi uses religion in his political campaigns too. In 2002 Modi made a 4200-kilometer yantra around India, called the Gaurav Yatra (pride procession) campaigning for politics under the umbrella of a religious tour. It would be more correct to label the yatra as a political yatra (Jaffrelot 2016:196). Generally a yatra means a pilgrimage. But Modi in fact re-invented this form of yatra politics as Mahatma Gandhi had done in his fight for independence. But in Modi's case the yatra relied on Hindutva ideology and fed some Hindu fears about the high birth rate of Muslims due to Muslim polygamy (Jaffrelot 2016:196).¹² Modi is eager to embrace the Hindutva definition of Hinduism that has also been adopted in the Indian Constitution of 1950 stating, a Hindu is one who belongs to any religion of Indian origin (Sharma 2002:24). Thus Modi will glorify Buddha as being born a Hindu and an incarnation of Vishnu. Literally calling Buddhism thus a sect within Hinduism.

Now let us look at how and why Modi is projecting himself to follow in Vivekananda's footsteps. Hall writes that Modi's public admiration for Vivekananda began when becoming Prime Minister of India became likely in 2014 (Hall 2017:124). But even before 2014 when Modi was engaged as Chief Minister of Gujarat between 2001 and 2014, did he refer to Vivekananda on social networks. Describing Vivekananda as a guiding light and an inspiration for India's youth, were the words he used. The campaign for State election in 2012 saw an intensification of the glorifying of Vivekananda during Modi's political campaigns (fig. 4).

¹² Modi said in Hindi: हम पाँच हमारे पच्चीस, meaning "We are five, we will have twenty five children".



Fig. 4: Modi campaigning for Gujarat State elections in 2012.
Source: www.narendrsmodi.in

In September 2012 Modi started, what he called the Swami Vivekananda Yuva Vikas Yatra. The entire month he was campaigning for the State election and at the same time the glorification of Vivekananda for which journalists critiqued him as well (fig. 5). The commemoration that Vivekananda was born 150 years ago was used by Modi to call out 2012 as the “Year of the Youth” in Gujarat (fig. 6).



Fig. 5: Modi in the 2012 State elections and glorification of Vivekananda.
Source: firstpost.com

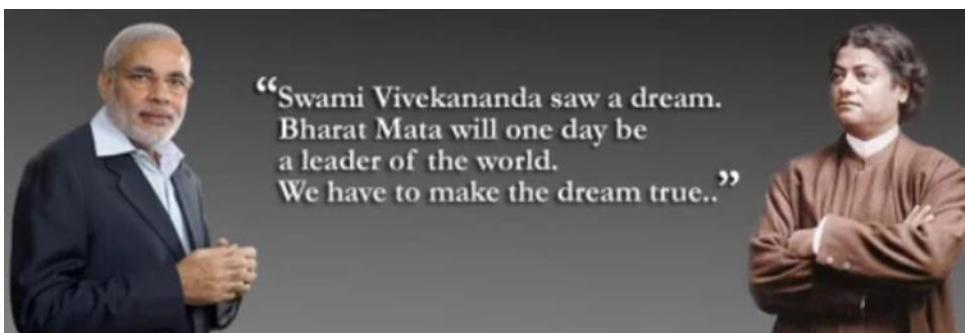


Fig. 6: Poster for the 150-year birth celebrations of Vivekananda.
Source: globalbusiness2.wordpress.com

Nationalism

Since Modi is associated with the RSS from early childhood, some writers accuse Modi of a nationalistic outlook in line with RSS ideology. Whether this is true about his present way of thinking is to be found out. Religious nationalism entered India without doubt through the Hindutva ideas of Savarkar. It is a chauvinistic form of Hindu nationalism. The Gaurav Yatra (Pride procession) undertaken by Modi in 2002 during the state elections, in which he walked some 4200 kilometres to hold rallies in many cities, was a means of politics that had overtones of Hindutva ideology (Jaffrelot 2016:196). As a smart communicator during the 2007 state elections, Modi set up a TV channel in Gujarat called “Vande Gujarat” which is reminiscent of the Vande Mataram song (Jaffrelot 2016:202).¹³ It is the Vande Mataram song that the RSS considers as the real national anthem. Then there is the matter of shrewd and effective use of symbols by Modi when he occasionally changes his dress. In order to express his humble Gujarat roots, Modi wore during his campaigns the Gujarati turban and shirt, *kurta*, (fig. 4) and at the same time stressing that he was a strict vegetarian (Jaffrelot 2016:202). Seizing the opportunity to convey a message through association seems to be a well-considered strategy. In 2014 Modi understood that his image was “a crucial selling point” in the elections. Hence he had latex Modi masks made that BJP candidates did wear when they filed their nomination papers (Price 2015:56). A feat that had been done in the West but never seen before in India. Likewise unveiling images of Vivekananda appears to be an effective way to reinforce Hindu ideology. As recent as 2020 Modi unveiled a statue of Vivekananda at JNU university in Delhi (Eastmojo Nov. 12, 2020) (fig. 7).

¹³ Vande Mataram is a poem and ode, written in Sanskrit, to the motherland personified as the “mother goddess”.

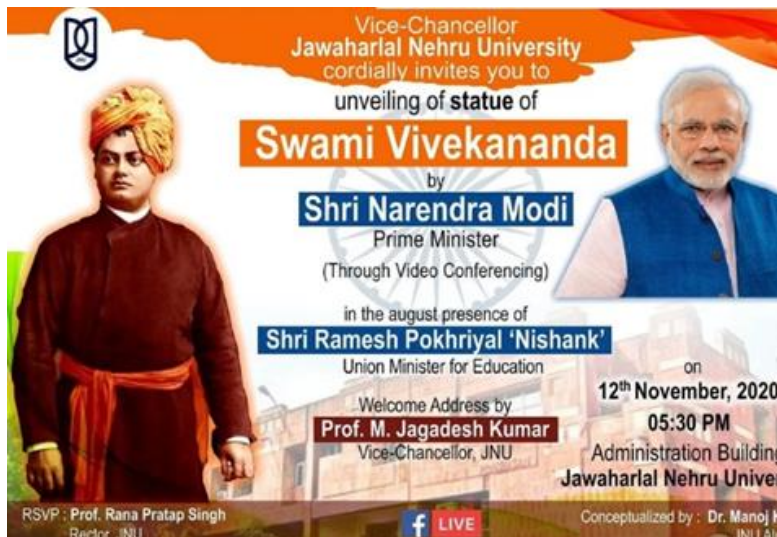


Fig. 7: Modi unveiling a statue of Vivekananda at JNU.

Source: www.eastmjo.com

Service, seva, reforms

Around the year 1970 after Modi was refused by several monasteries to enter the traditional life of a Hindu monk, he decided to abandon that ambition and embark on a career of “political service” (Marino 2014:36). At that time his association with the RSS also grew closer. Signing up with the RSS was a conscious act accepting renunciation, dedication and hard work. He spends his life as a true RSS volunteer, *pracharak*, practising the virtues of vegetarianism, no alcohol and celibacy. This involves self-denial and service to others (Price 2015:31). Considering Modi’s affiliation with RSS and Hindutva ideology one may assume that he endorses Hindutva ideas of Golwalkar that caste is responsible for the “downfall of the Hindus” and to abolish caste (Jaffrelot 1996:61). Yet Modi’s ideas about caste remain vague since he denies the relevance of class and caste and says he will not use it in politics (Marino 2014:58). This was said by him in the run-up of the 2014 election. Price however is of opinion that Modi indirectly used his lower caste (OBC)¹⁴ status to influence voters (Price 2015:207). It is when referring to the greatness of Vivekananda that Modi often emphasizes service to the nation. He literally said that Vivekananda’s aim was to serve *Daridra Narayan*, or a service to the poor as service to God. To improve the life of the poor, Modi understood that in financial matters, the poor had to be approached directly and not through middlemen who transferred money to their own pockets. Modi’s solution in 2016 was, *garib kalyan*

¹⁴ OBC stands for “Other Backward Classes”, a class of socially and educationally backward people established by the Government of India for affirmative action programs.

melas, a programme to provide direct benefits of various government schemes to the poor and thus effectively eliminating greedy middlemen (Marino 2014:162).

Global spread/outreach

About 20 million diasporic Indians live outside the homeland but are nevertheless considered Indian citizens. This can be as either living outside or of Indian descent. The Indians in the USA are the second largest Asian group of people outside the homeland. To politicians and Narendra Modi this fact has not gone unnoticed. Around the year 1999 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was prime minister of India for the BJP, Vajpayee send Modi on several diplomatic missions among others to Malaysia and Australia (Marino 2014:81). The BJP may have been preparing Modi thus for a high government post, considering in 2001 State elections were to be held in Gujarat. As a result of foreign reports that Modi failed to act as Chief minister of Gujarat, during the 2002 communal riots, he was denied to enter the USA in 2005. But this did not prevent Modi from speaking to USA audiences via satellite (Wallstreet Journal: May 2, 2014). Going abroad and unveiling statues of Vivekananda in Singapore by Modi, must have been done to keep in contact with the Indian diaspora. Involving transnational communities in national politics is a deliberate strategy of Modi to have people connected to the homeland, its memory or the myths about that homeland. Solidarity with the homeland can create long distance nationalism and Hindu-nationalism. This Hindu nationalism in the diaspora can influence from India to the diaspora or conversely influence Hindu nationalism in India itself (Anderson 2015:47).

Referring to Vivekananda

Since Modi regularly quotes Vivekananda, the question arises as to what means and instruments Modi uses to refer to Vivekananda. In 2012 Modi was still the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. On a daily basis between January 2012 and January 2013 Modi posted sayings from Vivekananda on social networks (Statesman 2017). He wrote: “Swami Vivekananda is revered as one of the most prolific thinkers and a guiding light who took India and it’s message to the entire world”. And also “Let us pledge to leave no stone unturned to integrate our youth in India and progress & ensure youth-led development across the Nation” (Statesman 2017). These references of Modi came at a time when in 2012 State elections were held. In September 2012 Modi started, what he called the Swami Vivekananda Yuva Vikas Yatra. The entire month he was campaigning for the State election and at the same time the

glorification of Vivekananda (fig. 8). Modi claimed that Vivekananda strived for a strong and developed India. Modi went on a month-long tour, *yatra*, across the state of Gujarat to spread this message of Vivekananda among the youth (www.narendramodi.in).



Fig. 8: Swami Vivekananda Yuva Vikas Yatra in 2012.
Source: www.indiatvnews.com

Modi celebrated in the State Gujarat, 2012 as the “Year of the Youth” to remember that Vivekananda was born 150 year ago (Statesman 2017). He also went abroad and unveiled a statue of Vivekananda in Singapore. The online magazine India Today, reports in 2012 that Modi is using Vivekananda as an icon and his inspiring words, to boost his election campaign (India Today 2012). As recent as 2023, on January 12, Modi continues to associate himself with Vivekananda and memorizes the birthday of Vivekananda (fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Source: twitter @narendramodi

Text of fig. 9:

स्वामी विवेकानंद को उनकी जयंती पर सादर नमन। उनका जीवन राष्ट्रभक्ति, आध्यात्मिकता और कर्मठता के लिए सदैव प्रेरित करता है। उनके महान विचार और आदर्श देशवासियों का मार्गदर्शन करते रहेंगे।

Translation: Tributes to Swami Vivekananda on his birth anniversary. His life always inspires for patriotism, spirituality and hard work. His great thoughts and ideals will continue to guide the countrymen.

Through his Hindi twitter account he reaches out to the ordinary Indians. The twitter account of @narendramodi is portrayed as India's official Government twitter account. Via this account he reaches 87 million followers (fig. 10). By comparison The president of the US, Jo Biden, has just 37 million followers. Selfless service to the country may be one of the guiding principles for Modi to quote and promote Vivekananda.



Fig. 10: Twitter account of Modi. Source: @narendramodi

Conclusions

The common factor in the lives of Vivekananda and Narendra Modi is their connection to Hinduism. Both characters have influenced Hinduism in India and abroad. Yet Vivekananda's Hinduism is a philosophical Hinduism rooted in Vedanta-supplemented with selfless service. Modi's Hinduism is a political Hinduism ingrained in cultural and nationalistic aspects. He emphasizes and encourages the preservation and promotion of Hindu cultural values and traditions in the context of India's history that has its roots in Hindutva. Consequently, this thesis has revealed that the Hinduism they speak of has both similarities and fundamental differences. Since Hinduism is a complex and multifaceted religion, differences of interpretations are inevitable. Hinduism is not an 'ism' like Christianity or Islam. Modi tends to reshape Hinduism in such an overarching form. Many kinds of Hinduisms are practiced in Indian villages and hamlets. Worshipping a local deity, unknown within the mainstream Hindu pantheon of Hindu gods, is equally a form of Hinduism. Hence it would be more appropriate to speak of Hindu religions (plural). This is in line with Gavin Flood's definition that Hinduism is a religion that includes a whole range of practices.¹⁵

Vivekananda was a monk who brought a universal message to India and the world. A message of tolerance stressing that all roads aim at the same goal. Through the Rama Krishna Mission that he established, service to society and the poor was started as a kind of religious worship. The effect of social reforms, such as Vivekananda's establishment of hospitals and schools, and the effect of Modi's programs for the poor in a comparison with each other, may need further investigation to assess their contribution to uplift the life of the poor.

Vivekananda's teaching may have sparked feelings of patriotism or even nationalism at a time when India was still under colonial rule. From his various utterances one gets the impression that Vivekananda did not value politics and certainly not when it entailed exclusion of people. The basis of Modi's thinking is formed in his youth when he joined the RSS. The Hindu-nationalistic ideology of Hindutva proclaims that India is a Hindu nation. There is no philosophy in Modi's speeches other than his practical yoga. Political heroes are glorified by him because of their involvement with the RSS or in case of military conflicts with enemy Pakistan.

¹⁵ Flood 2017:8.

Yet there are similarities in what both characters say and do. Vivekananda and Modi stress both the glorious past of India and of its religion. In Vivekananda's words, India has forgotten its rich heritage. For Modi the past is an ancient Hindu civilization as defined by Hindutva that strives for a Hindu nation. The two travelled widely in India. While Vivekananda's mission was to discover what his mission in life is, Modi's purpose was to mobilize people in political rallies to rally voters. Both also inspire the youth. While Vivekananda would awaken them to provide selfless service to the poor (Rolland 1930:287), Modi would mobilise them to demonstrate their collective physical endurance on the International Yoga Day. The purpose of Vivekananda's yoga was not simply enhancement of physical prowess, but more importantly, refinement of the soul. Moreover, Vivekananda's social service is service to God. The monks of the Rama Krishna Order, as established by Vivekananda, are to dedicate their life to the service of society. Likewise social programs for the benefit of the poor have been set up through the BJP and Modi.

The differences between Vivekananda and Modi are mainly due to the doctrines they adhere, their outlook and actions. Emphasizing the unity of religions or that Hinduism is the mother of all religions, as stressed by Vivekananda, is a view not expressed by Modi. Modi coats his Hinduism in a love for the nation or nationalism. Besides Hinduism, Modi seems to have respect for Buddhism, which he sees as a sect originated within Hinduism and Buddha as an incarnation of a Hindu god (Vishnu). On the issue of caste, Vivekananda as a monk who emphasized the unity of people, rejected the caste system. Although Modi said he does not use caste in politics, his OBC background however was effectively used by the BJP in the elections (Price 2015:207). Remarkable, for Modi, who talks much about religion, is how his biographer wrote that Modi does not consider himself religious (Marino 2014:201). In this context, it may be important to consider that politicians in different situations express different personal beliefs and opinions on different times. This statement that Modi does not consider himself a religious person, is not found anywhere other than in the biography. And yet, the biography must have been approved by Modi.

Now let us turn to the main research question of this thesis, why does the politician Modi claim to follow in the tradition of Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk? The answer to this question can be established through the utterances of Modi himself and through the writings of various authors. Modi's early reference to Vivekananda coincides and starts at a time when India held elections. Modi's started referring to Vivekananda more and at the same time he promotes the International Yoga day which is line with Vivekananda's four programs of

Yoga. Fostering Yoga and Hinduism as an ancient and tolerant faith, Modi started to project himself as the inheritor of Vivekananda's legacy. Modi heavily quoted Vivekananda as the prospect of becoming Prime Minister of India became plausible (Hall 2017:124). Political Yatras, marches, were organised and named as Vivekananda Yuva Vikas Yatra (Vivekananda Youth Development March). Describing Vivekananda as a guiding light, and claiming a higher authority, he gave an indirect call to voters to vote for himself and his party. Thus, why Modi claims to follow the tradition of Vivekananda is caused and shaped by his political and personal ambitions.

Modi however is selective in what he quotes or refers to of Vivekananda. The discrepancy between Vivekananda's philosophical Hinduism, or Neo-Vedanta and Modi's Hinduism is that Vivekananda's aim was to show a path of liberation that includes service to society. The Hinduism of Modi is a nationalistic Hindutva, in which his personal ambitions for a Hindu nation takes shape. Modi's popularity owes much to his active seeking media attention. The clever use of political marches, social media and even saffron robes and headgears testifies to a deliberate strategy that goes hand in hand with a skillful appropriation of Vivekananda's unblemished legacy. Modi, taking cue from Vivekananda's message to the world, invokes that India is 'Vishwa Guru' (World's Teacher). But what he actually nurtures is a geopolitical ambition to make India a big power and to project himself as the leader of the world. It seems that the international community is not averse to this ambition since Modi is being courted by the leaders of world's big powers from Biden to Putin.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to a better understanding of how Modi consciously and selectively manipulates Vivekananda's legacy to further his personal and political aspirations and image-building on the national and international platform. Thus, religion has been instrumental in the pursuit of political goals, particularly in the Indian context. Religion and politics of India is a subject that has the attention of the academia. Often this is related to politics of secularization or religion, caste and politics. This thesis has unfolded some methods and practices of a popular Indian politician who uses religion and the association of a well-known religious person in pursuit of political aspirations.

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