

Nepali Hindutva: Barriers to the Transnational Diffusion of a Religious Ideology

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Abstract

This article examines the potential diffusion of Indian-style Hindu nationalism (Hindutva or ‘Hindu-ness’) to Nepal. Recent political rhetoric, political manifestos, publications and protest events suggest that ideological movements based on Hindutva ideology may be growing in strength in Nepal. This article contextualizes the possibility of diffusion of Hindutva ideology through the lens of a simple ‘supply and demand’ model. While many actors (norm receivers) in Nepal may wish to localize Indian-style Hindutva in the country there are multiple barriers to its successful diffusion. These barriers include a complex history of political religion that was primarily tied to Nepal’s former monarchy (what I term “Royal Hindutva”). This historical path dependence put Nepal on a different trajectory to India, where Hindutva emerged as a form of religious modernization with a large middle-class base. In addition (and connected to that path dependence), Nepal’s political and religious ecosystem presents a challenging environment for the diffusion of Indian-style populist Hindutva, including stubbornly heterogeneous religious institutions and no effective political agents or organizations to localize Hindutva norms in Nepal.

Introduction

On the face of it, we would expect Nepal to be a likely candidate for the spread of Hindu nationalist norms. As the world’s only other Hindu majority country (other than India) and a country long deemed under India’s cultural and socio-economic hegemony and with an open 1800 km border with India, Nepal would seem to be highly susceptible to the diffusion of Hindu nationalist norms. This is even more apparent since 2014, when a Hindu nationalist government under Narendra Modi has been in power in India, senior members of which have spoken of promoting politicized Hindu consciousness in Nepal, a country which more extreme members of the BJP coalition see as part of an “akhand Bharat”, or ‘greater India’ (Lal 2023).

However, the results of this (still ongoing) diffusion process in Nepal are ambiguous and regionally variable. This makes the subject an interesting case for the broader political science literature on the diffusion of ideas and ideologies. Acharya, for example, (2014, p 241) has pointed to ‘localization’ as a key concept for understanding the diffusion of norms:

Instead of just assessing the existential fit between domestic and outside identity norms and institutions, and explaining strictly dichotomous outcomes of acceptance or rejection, localization describes a complex process and outcome by which norm-takers build congruence between transnational norms, including norms previously institutionalized in a region, and local beliefs and practices

Ambrosio and Tolstrup (2019) provide an example of how to study this ‘localization’ of norms, in their exploration of authoritarian diffusion from Russia to its neighbors, carefully tracing how norms, ideologies and mechanisms were localized by norm receivers in those countries:

For exampleBelarus served as a sort of autocratic laboratory for the establishment of authoritarianism in Russia under Vladimir Putin which, in turn, served as the basis for Hungary's transformation from what many observers believed was a consolidated democracy toward a more autocratic political system (Ambrosio and Tolstrup 2019, p 2746)

In the field of the sociology of religion, scholars have examined the failed spread of Salafist norms to Bosnia (Selimovic, 2023), of Gandhian norms of non-violence to the United States (Chabot and Dugvendak, 2002) and of various versions of Muslim Brotherhood ideology to Jordan (Wagemakers 2020). In all these examples, the key to the study has been a careful analysis of how norm receivers in the host country adapted or blocked aspects of an externally originated ideological system to suit their own environment. Historical legacies, existing social norms and existing institutions all provide a more or less hospitable environment for normative structures originating elsewhere.

This study of Hindutva in Nepal provides a rich example of the contingencies involved in transnational religious diffusion. Needless to say, this paper is also a (fairly rare) example of 'South-South' diffusion of ideas, none of which are easy to situate in a secular, liberal framework. In terms of substantive content, as I will discuss in the conclusion, it also bears on some interesting discussions related to Lipset's (1971: 147-9) speculation about how traditional forms of religious belief can, in a sense, 'vaccinate' a population against more politically radical formations loosely related to those traditional beliefs (in his case, Catholicism and Nazism).

The article is organized as follows: it begins by arguing that a 'demand' exists for Hindutva-adjacent ideology in Nepal, as evidenced by events in the last few years, including publications, protests, online rhetoric, Indian geopolitical influence, patterns of religious conversion and political party platforms. But does an adequate 'supply' of effective organizations and networks exist to meet this implicit demand and localize a version of Hindutva in Nepal? The next part of the essay addresses this question: firstly, by looking at the historical path dependent development of political religion in Nepal compared to India. After defining three analytically fundamental features of Hindutva in India the article contrastingly summarizes Nepal's historical experience of political religion, showing how, in Nepal, unlike India, political religion has been intimately bound up with monarchical power and, theologically, with syncretic practices. The article then assesses whether the 'supply' side of Hindutva, in terms of the institutions and agents trying to 'localize' Hindutva norms in Nepal, can meet this potential 'demand'.

Given the complexity of the religious politics of Nepal, it makes sense to state the basic argument of this article at the beginning. In short, Nepali Hindutva is really two phenomena: what I term "Royal Hindutva"¹ and 'Popular Hindutva'. The former is associated with the figure (literally and metaphorically) of the former King, including the rituals and festivals that used to center around his person, and has a base of support among high caste Hindus of the hilly areas of Nepal. 'Popular Hindutva' on the other hand, is associated with Indian-style (although not necessarily Indian) religious

¹ I borrow this phrase from Jha (2008) although he was not using it to distinguish this type of Hindutva from a more 'popular' one

ideology and appears to be imitating some aspects of Indian Hindutva's populist, xenophobic agenda. Popular Hindutva is geographically concentrated in urban areas in Nepal's Terai (plains) closest to Indian media and political influence.

This article will chart this bifurcation, arguing that religious-political entrepreneurs may yet find ways to bridge these two Hindutvas and localize a version of Hindutva in Nepal. However, at present, 'Royal Hindutva' is a softer (but more elitist) version of Hindutva and is acting somewhat like a vaccine, preventing the spread of the more virulent strain.

A contemporary 'demand' for Hindutva in Nepal?

Based on the essays by Letizia (2016) and Bhargava (2016) in the David Gellner edited volume on 'Religion, Secularism and Ethnicity in Nepal' one would be quite surprised, several years later, to see so many commentators concerned about the rise of Hindu extremism in Nepal. For example, Letizia uses the Nepali Supreme Court decision on the fate of the 'living Goddess' the Kumari (2016: 58), to show how religious tradition and modern conceptions of rights can live side by side. Bhargava sees Nepal, after its 2015 constitution as an example of a "South Asian secularism" that "goes beyond disestablishment [of a state Hindu religion] by valuing the presence of multiple religions in the public discourse" (2016: 451). For Bhargava the 2015 constitution marked a turn towards a more egalitarian, less privileged Hinduism in Nepal (2016: 455).

Indeed, there has long been a somewhat cliched conception of religion in Nepal as tolerant, syncretic and localistic. In this conception, when religion in Nepal accommodates itself to a modern, globalized world, it will do so piecemeal, through the mediations of religious traditions that are already expert in negotiating difference. As one recent commentator put it "authentic [Nepal's heterogenous] Hinduism and Hindutva are dichotomous" (Rai, 2022).

However, in intervening years, numerous researchers and journalists see an ominous turn toward religious nationalism, starting as a backlash to the supposed imposition of a secular constitution (promulgated in 2007) and ongoing perceived Western influence in promoting secularism (Seddon 2014: 79-80). This Hindu backlash has grown with the success of the BJP in India since 2014.

At the same time, secular critics argue that this seemingly secular constitution leaves open the door for pro-Hindu discrimination, based on its ambiguous statement of protection for "immemorial" religion (*sanatan dekhi caliyeko dharma samskrtiko samraksan* – 'preservation of the religion/s that have been existing since time immemorial') and the implicit exclusion of Christianity and Islam from this protection. Two international reports on religious freedom from the US State Department (US State Department 2022) and UK Parliament (APPG 2022) focus on this theme, for example they describe: barriers put in the way of registering churches and non-Hindu affiliated NGOs; increasing arrests for cow slaughter offenses; Covid 19 regulations being used to target Christians, for example a Pastor who claimed prayer could cure Covid was arrested, while online Hindu gurus arguing the same were not and anti-proselytization codes (Section 158 of the 2018 Criminal Code) being used to target Christians.

Wagner (2018) highlights the rise of Hindutva rhetoric in Parliamentary debates on the new constitution, with Christianity increasingly depicted as “the spectre of imperialism” (2018: 151), evoking a common trope of a Nepal buffeted by unseen and malevolent influences from outside. Secularist commentators in Nepal (Dixit 2020, Lal 2022; 2023, Rana 2023, among many others) have condemned the use of Hindutva-adjacent rhetoric and symbolism in public life, not least by former prime minister K P Oli, for example his attempt to claim Ram’s birthplace in Nepal (in Ayodhyapuri, Chitwan), gifts of gold to the Pashupatinath temple and the increasing public presence of secular leaders at Hindu events in imitation of Narendra Modi’s blurring of the religious and the civic (Daniel 2021).

There are reports of increasing tensions with Nepal’s Muslim and Christian minorities (who may number around 5% and 3% of the population respectively). Media reports (Basnet 2019; Giri 2023; Kathmandu Post 2015; Meayangbo 2023; Paudel 2017; Yadav 2021) refer to various incidents over the last 10 years including provocative processions through non-Hindu communities which have led to counter-violence in some cases². Most of these incidents have taken place in the Terai (plains area), where Indian *sangh parivar* networks have had most access to Nepal.

I investigated one recent incident which occurred in October 2023 in Nepalganj, close to the Indian (Uttar Pradesh) border where a derogatory social media post by a Hindu youth about the prophet Mohammad led to a protest by Muslim residents of Nepalganj, leading to a counter protest by a variety of local Hindutva outfits, and (allegedly) Indian supporters from across the border. Accusations were made that a local Muslim ward chairperson was waving the Pakistani flag while he was protesting at the Chief District Officer’s headquarters, because no action had been taken on the initial Islamophobic social media post³. Eventually a curfew was imposed to stem rising waves of communal tension in the city (Gahatraj 2023). Events like these have caused a less visible social divide between Hindus and Muslims, with one local Muslim journalist describing her own experience⁴ of a virtual caste divide between Muslims and Hindus that she had never experienced until the last few years, with Muslims being asked to bring their own utensils to weddings and parties.

In June 2023, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) of Nepal (an outfit directly modeled on India’s Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh / RSS) met in Saptaru, Saptari District, gathering youths from 60 districts for a total of 120 persons: “Wearing the traditional khaki trousers of *sangh parivar* youth they trained with sticks (*lathis*) in preparation for a “war” with an unnamed “enemy”. (Nepal Khabar 2023). I was told by respondents in Janakpur⁵ that the intention was to intervene in a mayoral election against a popular Muslim candidate for local office.

² Sporadic incidents did occur at various times after democracy’s restoration in 1990, including attacks on Muslims and mosques during the Ayodhya mosque demolition incident in Uttar Pradesh in 1993 and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It is hard to find evidence of such incidents before 1990 during the monarchical *panchayat* system.

³ In interview (April 2024) Mr Sharafat Khan, (ward chairperson of Ward 5 Nepalganj) said that a young supporter had waved the (green) Medina flag from the CDO’s office balcony, and he had immediately told him to stop.

⁴ Interview with Shahida, Muslim journalist in Nepalganj, April 2024

⁵ Interview with journalist Bhola Paswan, Janakpur, July 2023

There are also concerns about the rising support for the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP / National Democratic Party), the closest Nepal has to a Hindutva-affiliated national party. In the 2022 federal election the RPP achieved 5.7% support, up from 3.3% in 2017. These numbers are well down from the party's 1990's peak when it was scoring between 12 and 18% nationally, but only in the last few years has the RPP begun to echo the Indian BJP's rhetoric on Hindu nationalism, while in the 1990's the party was more squarely controlled by ex-monarchical (panchayat) officials and focused chiefly on pro-monarchy issues. The much larger Nepali Congress is not immune to these concerns with substantial factions within the party, apparently including party president She Bahadur Deuba, favouring an end to secularism (Daniel 2021, Kathmandu Post 2024).

In the world of publishing there has been a recent attempt to translate and apply Savarkar's original book on Hindutva (Savarkar [1923], 2021) to Nepal (Niraula and Nilkumar 2024). This book explores familiar and resonant tropes of Nepal's enthrallment to western models of education and politics and blames these failures on the influence of secularism and of the Christian conversion which it has allowed. A cruder type of literature is circulating in the Terai, coming out of the pilgrimage center Janakpur, in the form of Islamophobic Hindi language pamphlets⁶ about the prophet Mohamad, which activists are using to generate panic about a supposed exponential growth of the local Muslim population, linking the prophet's supposed licentious private life to the behavior of Muslims in Nepal.

In the media and among the general public there is an increasing turn toward Hindutva-inflected rhetoric and perspectives. Popular media accounts of Hindu gurus frequently take a political turn. For example, the Facebook feeds of Purush Raj Purush, a popular guru frequently posts about the threat of Christian conversion and alleged attacks on Hindu temples by Muslims and Christians, alongside regular posts about pilgrimages and advice on diet and meditation techniques. Other, more extreme Facebook based creators repeat the Indian Hindutva meme of "love jihad", alleging that Muslim gangs are targeting Hindu girls and women for 'seduction' and the literal 'reproduction' of their religion⁷. After the January 22nd, 2024 inauguration of the Ayodhya temple in Uttar Pradesh I personally saw the border cities of Nepalganj and Biratnagar awash with the saffron Hindutva flag (the Hanuman flag) to celebrate the inauguration⁸. Respondents near these cities frequently cited the inauguration as a good omen for Nepali politics – contrasting the *pap* (sin) of Nepali leaders with what they saw as Modi's bold moral politics⁹.

This latter connection to India opens another dimension of 'demand' for Hindutva in terms of geopolitical influence. This is a sensitive topic swathed in conspiracy type thinking and a very long-term suspicion of India's hidden influence over Nepal's

⁶ For example "Sunni Islam ki nangi tasvir" (naked picture of Sunni Islam) shown me during interview with Hindutva activist in Janakpur, June 2024

⁷ For example, "Love Jihad, Mission Failed" posted on Facebook by the Hindu samrat sena pramukh karyalaya (Hindu imperial army main office), July 23, 2023

⁸ In Biratnagar a Muslim focus group (interview May 2024) saw the ubiquitous flags as deliberate land mines; "if a Muslim steps on a flag accidentally it will be on Youtube in minutes and there will be trouble"

⁹ His reputation for personal asceticism rather than any particular policies.

politics and economy. Indian agents associated with the BJP and RSS might well have an incentive to have Hindutva-sympathetic politicians and movements under their sway in Nepal, given geopolitical competition with China, and given what one journalist in Nepalganj referred to as the Indian security services' "obsession with controlling Muslims near its border" who, in his opinion are seen as "potential terrorists"¹⁰ Some in Nepalganj¹¹ saw it as suspicious that protesting crowds of Hindu activists could appear in the morning and disappear (presumably over the open Indian border) by the evening if events "heated up" too much. Indian media and social media (state controlled or RSS-influenced) often fuel the fire of protests and disputes on the Nepali side of the border. Youtube videos reported on the event in the context of a supposed rise in Muslim power in Nepal's Terai region, and blogs and social media feeds were full of articles reporting on, for example, "Jihad in Nepal" (Joshi 2023), twisting the events to fit a Hindutva narrative of Muslim extremism. This media then gets absorbed in Nepal's border region where Hindi language media is more popular than Nepali language media.

There are constantly allegations that India is funding pro-Hindutva organizations and elected leaders. In Biratnagar a respondent claimed that the RSS was "taking Congress leaders on fully paid trips to Calcutta" for seminars and "picnics"¹². In Kathmandu, allegations of Indian Hindutva influence have long been directed at the RPP (although strongly denied by the leaders I interviewed) but more recently have focused on the Nepali Congress, with commentators pointing to a connection between the current chair of the Viswa Hindu Parishad, Yotshna Saud, and her husband, (Narayan Prasad Saud) a former Congress foreign minister. The pair visited Ayodhya in 2024 (New Spotlight Online 2024), offering words of praise for the newly inaugurated and politically contentious temple.

Finally, and more speculatively, there is reason to think a sociological niche exists for something like Nepali Hindutva. At the broadest level, Nepal has seen two waves of universalist and modernizing ideologies over the last 40 years, firstly with revolutionary Maoism, then with Pentecostal Christianity¹³. Both these ideologies have the problematic character (for many) of demanding a 'break' with tradition that can be very painful for adherents, despite the supposed gains in adopting a modernizing world view that opposes caste and reaches out to the wider world. Hindutva could potentially provide a modernizing ideology that does not require such a painful break with tradition, even as it 'updates' that tradition.

Ben Campbell (2016) provides a rich account of what this modernizing impetus involves, in his study of Tamang Christianity, which provides a "rationalizing, cost-effective ritual complex" (p 420) and a new, empowering "cultural image" (p 419) of a previously denigrated group. In research on Christian conversion in the Kathmandu Valley, Bownas (2022) argued that churches were providing an important function for migrants to the city, both practically in the form child-care, education and disciplinary practices (to overcome 'bad habits' such as drinking, smoking, gambling), and spiritually, in the form of narratives and community that partially replaced the lost

¹⁰ Interview with Sharafat Khan, Nepalganj April 2024.

¹¹ Interview with Jalak Ghaire, Nepalganj, April 2024

¹² Focus group interview with local Muslim leaders, Biratnagar, May 2024

¹³ I am, somewhat contentiously, omitting indigenous rights activism as this never had the 'mass' character of the other two ideological movements.

world of the village.

There is no a priori reason why some version of Hindutva could not meet the social needs of deracinated, mobile, anxious populations who have previously turned to communism and Christianity¹⁴, but to do so it would have to find a niche in a difficult environment.

Historical Path Dependency of Political Religion in Nepal

Despite some of the signs outlined above, I will argue that an organized and popular Hindutva has not yet taken root in Nepal. In order to do so, we will need to examine the obstacles to the entrenchment of Hindutva, starting with the historical trajectory of Nepal's political religion, compared with India. Below, I construct an ideal type of Indian Hindutva. Where Nepali Hindutva/s diverge will then be clearer.

Three Core Features of Hindutva in India: Religious homogenization; social welfarism; xenophobia.

To decide whether or not Hindutva has diffused to Nepal. I focus on three characteristics that emerge from a broad reading of the scholarly literature on Hindutva¹⁵: firstly, religious homogenization (adjacent to terms such as religious 'modernization' or 'reform'); secondly, social welfarism and thirdly, xenophobia directed at religious others.

Most scholars agree that contemporary Hindutva has its roots in the 19th century. While a secular nationalism slowly developed among British-adjacent elites, a shadow nationalism was developed in parallel out of religious materials. Starting with the reformist and universalist mission of the Arya Samaj and then with the various mystic-syncretic movements of the 19th century, this shadow religious nationalism became increasingly "monotheistic" in tone (Basu 2020). This monotheistic Hinduism modelled the Bhagavad Gita as a parallel to the Quran or Gospels and shoehorned diverse Hindu traditions into a set of 'compulsory' generic devotions focused especially on a masculinized image of Ram, crystallizing perhaps as a compensatory empowerment for marginalized upper castes working in the shadow of British rule (Vijayan 2019; 114). This Hindutva doxa was formalized in the 1920's and 1930's by V D Savarkar (2021, [1923]) and M.S.Golwalkar, among others, and in contrast to Gandhi's supposedly 'feminine' and inadequately Islamophobic nationalism, offered a vision of a return to Indian civilizational greatness (Vijayan 2019: 130-32).

As Sarkar (2022) emphasizes Hindutva can be understood as a simplified and

¹⁴ See Sharma (2002) for a similar argument, that Hindu traditionalists in Nepal have used anti-conversion legislation as an excuse not to reform their own religious practices and to offer a more 'social' dimension to Hindu worship.

¹⁵ Needless to say, the emic literature would not agree, for example Neelakandan (2023) strongly denies that xenophobia is a core feature of Hindutva, arguing that it exists at the margins only.

homogenized version of “Hinduism”, with the latter being a vastly more complex set of overlapping traditional practices. It provides a “minimum code” (Sarkar 2022: 229) including pilgrimages, yoga, sun worship and a focus on Ram, paralleling the basic devotee obligations of Hindutva’s rival, Islam. As part of this process, (in a kind of neo-Sanskritization) Hindutva-affiliated priests often adopt local festivals, nationalizing them with Hindutva characteristics (Berti et al 2011).

Hindutva also refers to a set of organizational practices focused on social welfarism and social discipline. This was a form of organization (*sangathan*) that penetrated society in a way that the elite, secular nationalism of Congress ultimately did not. K B Hedgewar’s founding of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or ‘National Volunteer Organization’) in 1925 marked the institutionalization of what Zavos (2000) terms a “horizontal” tendency in Indian Hindutva; through the *shakhas* (branches) that were founded all over India, youth gathered to perform martial arts, pray and perform works of voluntaristic welfare via the system of *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) and full timer *pracharaks* (preachers). While initially middle-class, these groups did, over time, welcome lower caste and non-elite members, even celebrating caste-inclusive feasts as early as the 1920s in opposition to traditionalist Brahminism. Their voluntarist ideals, for Zavos (2000, p 190):

Reflected the desire to present Hindu society as a homogenous, coordinated unit, working in a dedicated and organized fashion. It was in effect, the perfect vehicle for the articulation of *sangathan* [organization] as the salvation of Hindu society

As Andersen and Damle (2018) document in great detail, this RSS base has become the glue for a wide range of *sangh parivar* (organization family) groups. As they comment: (2018: xxii)

Perhaps a major factor holding this complex set of organizations together is the intensive socialization provided by the RSS in its ‘character building’ process, which includes attending RSS training camps and participating in a wide range of service activities

On this foundation in the RSS, Hindutva was able to slowly embed itself as an alternative imagined community (and through its service activities, a real community) in contrast to that of elites associated with the Indian Congress. After a dormant period following the assassination of Gandhi by an RSS member this slow penetration of society, arguably the most successful Gramscian ‘war of position’ in modern history, paid dividends. Beneath the dramaturgy of the Ram Janmabhoomi at Ayodhya (the movement to demolish a mosque on Ram’s supposed birth-place) and the specifically political strategies of Modi and the BJP lies this base in organizational capacity, what Sarkar (2022: 164) refers to as its “slow and patient cellular expansion”.

Moreover, Teltumbde (2020) and Longkumer (2020) show how this organizational capacity has penetrated in recent years more deeply into ‘lower’ strata of Indian society beyond its initial middle-class base, co-opting Dalits and scheduled tribes by a flexible welfarism, that incorporates Dalits and Adivasis into the universal “Hindu” community; the internal hierarchies are eased while the external borders (with Muslims and Christians) are rigidified. In a similar vein, Thachil (2014) showed how the BJP’s political success rested on *sangh parivar* welfarist activities at the grassroots level.

Finally, xenophobia has been a fundamental feature of Hindutva's ideology. The influence of fascism was relevant from the beginning of modern Hindutva, especially via M S Galwalkar, one of its key founders (Anah 2021). While talk of fascist linkages may comprise a genetic fallacy, most etc scholars agree that Hindutva has created rigid boundaries between Hindu believers and those of other faiths. As Basu (2020: 6) puts it, Hindutva tends to generate a "unified and jealous religiosity" based on its (partial) imitation of the Abrahamic faiths and translated into a political-religious ideology which is "India's version of a fascist utopia ethnically cleansed or purged of its "alien" elements" (Banaji, 2016: 224). Jaffrelot (2019), in particular, has painstakingly documented the various ways in which Modi's BJP government has mobilized such sentiments in both legislative and administrative actions against India's Muslim and Christian minorities.

Nepali Religious Politics: Diverging from India's Path

There has always been inter-penetration of politics and religion in Nepal, but this should not be confused with Indian-style Hindutva. When we look at the role of Hinduism in the Nepali polity over the last 100 years or so, we can find no parallel to Hindutva in India, primarily because Nepali Hindu-nationalism, until very recently, was intimately tied politically to the monarch and the ruling class. Where Hindutva in India focused on generating a horizontal (but exclusive) imaginary community of 'true Hindus' in contrast to 'outsiders' (Muslims, Christians, the British) Hindu politics in Nepal took more traditional, hierarchical and heterogeneous forms, with elites, by turns, taking advantage of, then shying away from the more populist and reformist types of Hindu sentiment.

Historically, claims of Nepal to preserve a 'pure' Hinduism from Mughal and British degradations across the border, were important to Nepal's rulers, possibly since the Turks overran Chatur in 1306 (Burghart 2007: 290-91). Nepal's warrior - unifier Prithvi Narayan Shah (referred to Nepal as the "asal Hindusthan" (real Hindu land) as opposed to the Islamified "Muglan" to the South, depicted as a place of religious disorder and impurity. This was echoed by Jang Bahadur Rana, (most famous of the hereditary Rana prime ministers who had sidelined the Shah monarchy), who in 1866 declared "In this Kali age [age of decadence and sin] this is the only country where Hindus rule" (quoted in Burghart 2007: 299).

For our purposes it is sufficient to note that these expressions of Hindu-ness aimed at foreign and elite audiences were never instrumentalized at the societal level in the form of religious modernization, mass education or the encouragement of social movements. This vision of religious tradition was locked into a rigid form by the Muluki Ain of 1854, a piece of legislation that marked out designated roles and separate laws for ethnic communities in a strict caste hierarchy¹⁶. This was quite alien to the (proto-Hindutva) Hindu reformers of the 19th century in India who were railing *against* caste hierarchies and trying to educate all castes in basic (neo-Vedic) Hindu philosophy. As Pfaff-Czarnacka (1997) notes, whatever Hinduization of Tibeto Burman peoples happened under the 18th and 19th century monarchy was in the mode of patrimonial imperialism, with subordinate groups adopting, superficially, some customs of the ruling Hindu elite.

¹⁶ As Hacchetu puts it (2023, 223) the code "translated diversity into inequality"

The Ranas eventually banned the Arya Samaj (a universalist reform movement anticipating themes of later Hindutva, although with less xenophobic elements) from Nepal in the late 19th century. They feared its seemingly demotic ‘smajist’ (society-ist) and iconoclastic ideology which was in sharp contrast to the Ranas’ ‘sanatanist’ traditionalism¹⁷. Later toward the end of their rule, the Ranas did seek the support of Hindutva groups in India, but (in a pattern that would be repeated for the next half century) this was an elite strategy, crafted to balance against the Indian Congress and its Nepali Congress allies who were in exile in India. Copland (2002) shows how Nepal was a kind of fantasy projection of Hindu purity¹⁸ even for Savarkar himself, and as Shaha (1990: 119) documents, this relationship “did not go beyond merely flirting with the Hindu Mahasabha just to create the impression that they enjoyed the sympathy of the Hindus in India”. Indeed, the anti-Rana movement in its early 20th Century form was arguably more deeply influenced by Arya Samaj ideas of Hindu equality than the Ranas were by Hindutva (Whelpton 2005, 79).

After the restoration of monarchical power (in 1959 after a brief interlude of democracy following the fall of the Ranas in 1950) King Mahendra, via his prime minister Tulsī Giri attempted to reach out to RSS founder Golwalkar (Guha 2008)¹⁹. But again, this royal embrace of the RSS did not involve inviting RSS *shakhas* (branches) to operate in Nepal and appears to have been more a marketing attempt to win support in India for the monarchy

As opposition to the authoritarian royal panchayat system heightened (and in direct response to it) King Birendra founded the World Hindu Organization (Vishwa Hindu Mahasang) in April 1981 and hosted a famous World Hindu Conference in 1988. A contemporary media report (Hinduism Today 1988) highlighted the monarch’s role:

For various reasons the King of Nepal emerged as the center of it all. The first 10 resolutions focused completely upon him. He was lauded and extolled for his promotion of a variety of significant religious projects in Nepal but most importantly he was beseeched to accept the role of being Hinduism’s Pope-like leader for the sake of unifying Hindus around the globe.

The WHO was closely linked to India’s Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), (Toffin, 2006: 230) an organization associated with the BJP-led *rath jatra* (chariot procession) to Ayodhya in the early 1990’s. However, despite these personal ties and pragmatic mutual support between Nepali monarch and Indian Hindutva, the symbolic pomposity of events like the 1988 conference (perhaps designed to distract from a burgeoning

¹⁷ See Uprety (1992:47): “First, the democratic organisational structure of the Samaj with its duly elected office bearers and governed by egalitarian precepts ran contrary to the ascriptive non-participatory polity of the Ranas. Second, the innovative ideas of the Samaj, like Shuddhi [purification] and niyog [widow re-marriage] brought a small earthquake in the Nepali society that was governed by rigid sanatanist [traditionalist] ideals”

¹⁸ See also Sharma (2004: 295) writing about the 1990s: “Hindu sentimentalists in India, too, seem to derive much consolation from the fact that Nepal is a Hindu state”.

¹⁹ Mahendra backed out of a visit to an RSS convention in 1963 but sent a message saying: “It is our desire to build up Nepal as an ideal Hindu Kingdom in the eyes of the world from every point of view... Even in days when some Hindus were victims of an artificial atmosphere and were ashamed of calling themselves Hindus, Nepal securely maintained herself as a Hindu Kingdom. All Hindus should take special pride in this fact.” (cited in Guha 2008)

democratic movement) contrasts with the populist trajectory of contemporary Hindutva in India. These showy events, which King Gyanendra also participated in in the early 2000s (Toffin 2006: 231) were top-down affairs and the Hinduism they advocated was anti-plebian, and traditionalist.

There was a final period of heightened Hindu-political activity in Nepal after the royal massacre of 2001, in which King Birendra was killed and replaced by his more conservative brother, Gyanendra. The last years of the Hindu monarchy (2001-2006), according to some scholars (Hausner 2007: 133) saw a “strong Hinduization” of the polity, with the ethos of the Hindu state “encompassing” (2007: 134) formerly more syncretic (Newar) traditions at the famous Pashupatinath temple site. Gyanendra’s embattled political position was seemingly pushing him into the arms of an array of Hindu traditionalist advisors, including his Aide De Camp, Major General Bharat Keshari Simha (associated with the *Vishnu Hindu Mahasangh*). This included support from a longstanding backer of the Shah royal family - the Gorakhnath Math (temple) in Uttar Pradesh whose latest chief priest became the firebrand Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, and who is quoted as saying, during the constitutional assembly debates that led to the declaration of a Nepali republic that: “the unifying force in Nepal, like the soul that unites the body, is the Hindu king and Hindu culture” (Seddon 2014: 52). Nevertheless, at the same time the Palace was, according to some commentators²⁰, trying to prevent actual anti-Muslim movement activities of the RSS in the border regions of Nepal – the monarch’s traditional role as patrimonial defender of minorities²¹ coming before its discursive alliance with Hindutva forces.

In contrast to the monarchy’s projection of (increasingly ersatz) religious purity and traditionalism, a more “liberal and tolerant” (Toffin, 2006: 226) religion was practiced among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley. This Newari religion was and is a complex syncretic set of practices, blending Buddhism and Hinduism²². Even today, in the Kathmandu Valley, most temples are under the control of Guthis (religious trusts) with Newar trustees. This Newar tradition has also survived any attempts to create a homogeneous ‘Hindu-Nepali’ identity in the Kathmandu Valley, as reflected in recent protests to protect Guthi autonomy from national government regulation (Sunuwar 2019).

The most important lesson from this brief overview of Nepal’s religious politics is the continuing (up to at least the end of the monarchy in 2006) traditionalism of Nepali elites’ appeals to religious legitimation. Indeed, as Mocko (2016) documents, the new secular government understood this and tried to disconnect the linkages between the monarchy and the many festivals and rituals that had intimately involved Shah kings. What was lacking in Nepali history was a grassroots, organized, reformed Hinduism inculcating (for better or worse) ‘horizontal’ and often exclusionary identities, such as

²⁰ Interview with Yubraj Ghimire (July 2023)

²¹ Several older Muslim respondents, in interviews for a Fulbright funded oral history project, agreed with this positive assessment of the monarch’s role.

²² See Gellner (2005) for a discussion of Newari syncretism and Toffin (1993) for a discussion of the “structure galactique” of Newari imagery and ritual and its complex fractal resonances that have survived into contemporary times, and resembling Charles Taylor’s (2007) depiction of early medieval religion in Europe – a far cry from the modernist impulses of the Hindutva that was evolving in India by the mid 1800’s.

we have seen in the case of India.

The evidence described at the beginning of this article (since 2007) may suggest the beginnings of such a popular Hindutva, but these significant historical differences between Nepal and India will make a Nepali Hindutva very complicated for religious entrepreneurs to localize in Nepal. The historical differences imply interest groups (especially the old pro monarchy groups) that are not well situated to support a mass movement. Other, related obstacles in the supply chain of a potential Nepali Hindutva are described below.

Political Supply: The Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and others

Nepal's equivalent of India's BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the RSS, has advocated for a restored monarchy and for a return to Nepal's status as a Hindu state. However, its electoral fortunes are relatively weak (as stated above) and its senior leadership have very different backgrounds to those of the contemporary BJP, many of whose leaders, most prominently Modi himself, emerged from the *sangh parivar* as *pracharaks* (volunteers) at the grassroots. I interviewed senior RPP leaders and opinion formers Rabindra Mishra and Dhuval Shamshar Rana (in 2024 and 2022 respectively). Mishra is a former BBC bureau chief who personally writes that he is a secularist who sees the promotion (of, in his depiction, a soft, tolerant, monarchical Hindu nationalism) as a functional necessity to unify Nepal and accentuate its fragile sovereignty, rather than a religious mission²³. Shamshar Rana took a patrician attitude to religious expression in Nepal (more reminiscent of the Indian Congress elite than the BJP), arguing that “most Hindus in Nepal are not too concerned about religion” because each household “has its own little temple”. He dismissed RSS-imitative activity on the Nepali border as the work of “those louts”, stating that the people of Madhesh (the heartland of Indian style Hindutva and of the formerly strong Madhesh separatist movement) were “not well educated” and that this best explained religious animosities in the region.

The main focus of the RPP is restoring monarchy (in either a “constructive”²⁴ or “constitutional” form) and abolishing Nepal's federal system of 7 provinces (established in 2015). Both these policy aims put the RPP in tension with the (Hindi or Maithili speaking) groups in the Terai that might otherwise be attracted to the RPP's anti-secularism. In interviews with Hindutva activists in this region, none were actively hostile to the restoration of the monarchy, but preferred to speak about a future “Hindu

²³ “I am, in principle, a republican and a secularist with a non-absolutist viewpoint towards federalism. But it harms, rather than benefits, a society when there is no harmony between ideology and ground reality. Personal thoughts or individual ideology count for nothing when it comes to long-term interest of a nation or benefit for the majority of the population. ‘Nation above Notion’ [book title] is based on this viewpoint, where my personal choice has become subservient to the national interest” (Mishra 2024)

²⁴ The term used by Senate Shrestha, advisor to Gyanendra, and meaning a more proactive role for the monarch, guiding governments rather than just acting as a backstop or neutral umpire. (interview July 2022).

Rashtra” (Hindu state) that may or may not involve former King Mahendra.²⁵ Unfortunately there are few reliable opinion polls or surveys conducted in Nepal so it is hard to confirm whether this perceived indifference to the monarchy in Nepal’s border regions compared to the hills is true.

At the local level, in Janakpur in Madhesh Province, centre of India-Nepal pilgrimage activity and intellectual heartland of Nepali Hindutva, an RPP leader²⁶ described his attempt to whip up a public outcry (in Summer 2023) over alleged instances of “Love Jihad” involving Hindu female students at a local college. He was frustrated when the national party “refused to take his calls” and showed little interest in this kind of populist campaign. He complained that the national party was only interested in “getting ministries” and that the RPP President – Rajendra Lingden – was a closet secularist who was actually trying to use Muslims as a vote bank in the Terai region, rather than launching an assault against them.²⁷ This kind of populist or demagogic Hindutva seems the exception rather than the rule within the RPP and is not backed up with any organic connections to local *sangh parivar* groups – indeed during the interview this RPP leader started a slanging match with a local Shiva Sena cadre, accusing his organization of being “pay for protest” agents of political parties. Conversely, most respondents from Hindutva affiliated organizations that I spoke to saw the RPP as “shout Hindus”, engaged in cheap theatrics rather than organization building along Indian lines.

Outside of the RPP, businessman Durga Prasai recently launched a populist, some would say demagogic, campaign for the restoration of the monarchy and of the Hindu state. However, his 2024 demonstrations in Kathmandu demanding a return to monarchy and to a Hindu state attracted fewer crowds on each succeeding day (from around 10,000 to a few hundred by the fourth day). His rhetoric focused on economic issues connected to indebtedness, invectives against all the political parties and crude xenophobia, and although the RPP initially supported his protest there was no evidence of a deeper strategy linking the RPP to Prasai (Giri 2023).

Indeed, Prasai’s anti political party rhetoric suggests another barrier to Hindutva in Nepal, implied in the discussion of the frustrated RPP cadre above; the very involution and corruption of Nepal’s political parties, who are seen as quasi business entities or cartels by many Nepalis, militates against their capture by any ideological movement²⁸. Leaders who are focused on using their capture of business and governmental entities to fund political campaigns cannot afford to replicate the long-term strategy of the BJP, many of whose leaders, with their *sangh parivar* background, are at least *seen* to be more personally committed and less corrupt than the average Indian politician.

Religious Supply: Nepal’s Heterogeneous Religious Landscape

²⁵ In interview, Rabindra Mishra of the RPP was keen to talk about the large crowds who attended a visit to Janakpur by former King Gyanendra in April 2024. Whether this is evidence of enthusiastic monarchism or just curiosity is less certain.

²⁶ Interview with Ram B J Singh, Madhesh RPP chairperson, Janakpur, July 2023.

²⁷ Indeed, this may genuinely reflect the RPP’s history as a monarchical-patrimonial party with a ‘duty to protect’ certain minorities.

²⁸ This has been the complaint long made about the Maoists, after they turned to democratic politics.

There is little evidence, in Nepal, of the religious consolidation reported for India by Jaffrelot (2007), Longkumer (2020) and several of the essays in Teltumbde (2020). In India, according to these accounts, Hindutva activists ‘adopt’ local priests and temples and ‘saffronize’ local religious traditions according to their politicized, generic model. By doing so, they incorporate marginalized groups (including indigenous communities and Dalits) into the broader category of ‘Hindu’ as constructed by the *sangh parivar*. Nepal’s fragmentary and heterogeneous religious infrastructure is a barrier to this kind of strategic consolidation.

Undoubtedly some gurus, such as the above-mentioned Pushpa Raj Purush have adopted a politicized discourse in the last few years, posting videos and tweets against secularism. But the network of ashrams belonging to these new, politicized gurus in Kathmandu is still heavily frequented by (a small number of) upper middle-class persons, with a target audience not that different from the ‘new religious movements’ like Iskcon²⁹ (see Toffin 2016 on these venues); an audience looking for spiritual relaxation and stress relief rather than political mobilization.³⁰ These ashrams are not part of larger networks as in India’s ‘school-shakha-mandir’ model (Sarkar 2022) of the Indian *sangh parivar*, where children are educated at Hindu schools, go to the shakha for martial arts training after school then worship at Hindutva-controlled temples. Even Chintamani Yogi’s small network of Hindu schools does not appear to be integrated into an intentional system of political indoctrination. In addition, gurus such as Raj Purush have sometimes managed to alienate non-upper caste audiences. For example, one of my research assistants, an ethnic minority (Magar), who is intellectually attracted to Hindutva ideas was alienated from the movement by some of Raj Purush’s online comments about the unsuitability of certain practices for non-Brahmins. These are own goals in a sense for a movement that might want to imitate the strategically inclusive practices of the Indian *sangh parivar*.

In Butwal, I interviewed leaders of the *Jyotish Mahasangh* (Astrologer’s Association)³¹ who consider themselves part of a loose network of Hindu nationalists, connected with the above gurus and ashrams. But their discourse was revealing as to the limitations of Hindutva ideology in Nepal. For these leaders, Nepali Hinduism truly is an “asli Hindu” (true Hindu) tradition, precisely because of its heterogeneous cultural elements such as 30 days of compulsory mourning for the dead, icon worship, ubiquitous giving and receiving of tika, and even the animistic elements infused in Nepali religious practice. However, they saw these practices as making Nepalis vulnerable to Christian conversion, given their elaborateness, perceived lack of ‘modernity’ and financial expense. Hindutva could provide a Hindu alternative to traditional Nepali religious practice, but, for these leaders, at great cost (a levelling and homogenization of traditions), hence their ambivalence about Indian-style Hindutva. At the local level, there are numerous Sanskrit medium government schools in Nepal, especially in the border regions. These schools cater almost entirely to poorer Brahmin families and

²⁹ See Toffin (2016) on these venues and their upper middle-class clients.

³⁰ This is also true of the Arya Samaj in Kathmandu (visited July 2023) which attracted a small upper middle-class clientele and whose scholarly presiding priest, Professor Upadhyaya who also heads the department of Sanskrit at Tribhuvan University, did not fit the mold of demagogic Hindutva.

³¹ Interview with Khim Prasad Poudhel and Janardan Neupane, Butwal, July 2023.

follow a more traditional curriculum than their equivalents in India.³²

It is relevant to note how religious institutions have engaged in political protest in recent years, as it reflects this lack of organizational intentionality or any kind of national-Hindutva consciousness. The controversy over the attempt by the Maoist government to replace South Indian priests at Pashupatinath in 2009 is indicative. In this controversy it was the communists who were the active party in pushing for a ‘national Hinduism’ with Nepali rather than Indian priests presiding at the temple. It was Nepali traditionalists who mostly took the side of the Indian priests and the traditional authorities at Pashupatinath. A Hindutva consciousness was nowhere in this debate. Presumably a true Nepali Hindutva would have seen this as an opportunity to take the issue from the Maoists (who were using it opportunistically) and demand reform of the purportedly corrupt Pashupati Trust, to remake it as a core institution of a Nepali Hindutva. However, because of the traditional connection between Pashupati and the funeral ceremonies of Nepali monarchs anti-secularists tended to side with India against the Maoists’ proposed reforms.

A similar lack of Hindutva motivation was seen with the proposed Guthi Bill in 2019. This bill had proposed to nationalize public and private guthis (trusts that own temples) and put them under a national commission. The protests against it came from local Newar traditionalists. Again, in this debate Hindutva did not figure. This was a battle between a secular government and traditional rights. The RPP opposed the bill, but this was in the name of localistic tradition not Hindu nationalism.

What of local religious movements outside the Kathmandu Valley? Toffin (2011) investigated the Krishna Pranami sect, concluding that although this sect demonstrated a kind of “soft Hindutva”, (2011, 182) in terms of core beliefs (a service orientation, cow devotion, missionary activity and hostility to Islam), nevertheless it was unassimilable to the political organization of Hindutva (taking its own commitment to *ahimsa* / non violence as paramount). Toffin takes this as evidence of a persistent and resistant heterogeneity of Hindu practice in Nepal, as opposed to India.

Another major religious barrier to the dissemination of Hindutva lies in the emergence (since the 1990s) of ethnic rights’ movements that often included a religious dimension in their demands for ethnic autonomy and a rebalancing of power away from upper caste Hindu elites in the Kathmandu Valley. Lecomte-Tilouine (2009, 150) refers to the way concepts of “Hindu colonialism” spread among minority communities in the 1990’s, partly encouraged by the Maoist insurgency (1996-2005). Among the Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley, according to Gellner (2003, 88), such religiously inflected resistance to the political center, dates back to the Rana movement and meant a conscious emphasis on the Newars’ Buddhist roots³³, as compared to Brahmanical elites.

Overall, Nepal’s syncretic, traditionalist and fragmentary religious infrastructure would require a major long-term effort to become a vessel for a homogenising religious ideology. Its famous temples (Pashupati and Shree Janaki) are under the control of (it is

³² Interview with principal of Sanskrit school near Tilottama, July 2023.

³³ For example the Newar Shakiya caste claims direct ancestry from Buddha’s lineage (Buddha’s caste name was Shakiya)

widely felt) backward-looking and sometimes corrupt leadership, more concerned with financial advancement than political movement building.³⁴ Those priests are also usually from India, and although they may have sympathies with Indian Hindutva they do not have the local knowledge or legitimacy to lead a Hindutva for Nepal. Its Hindu practices are still highly localistic, and as noted above, in many communities de-Hinduization was (until recently) the trend, rather than the opposite.

Movement Supply: A Confusing Panoply of Organizations

The panoply of organizations that form the ‘Omkar’ family (Nepal’s chaotic equivalent of India’s *sangh parivar*) keeps changing and is almost impossible to systematically track. Groups mentioned in interviews as active around Janakpur and other border regions include the Nepali Bajrang Dal, Nepal Shiva Sena, the Hindu Swawamsevak Sangh (Hindu Volunteer organization) (HSS), local branches of the Vishnu Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Hindu Yuva Vahini (Hindu youth battalion). These groups are very loosely (if at all) connected to the ‘traditionalist’ organizations, mainly based in Kathmandu, such as the Sanatan Dharma Sewa Samiti (immemorial religion service organization), associated with the former Queen Aiswarya. In fact, it was noticeable during field research that in Kathmandu, these organizations (such as the HSS and VHP) were very unwilling to speak; when a Nepali research assistant phoned one such organization he was met with a barrage of suspicious question, while in the border regions activists were quite happy to be interviewed, even by a foreigner, and were mostly open about their aims and activities.

Rebecca King (2005) is the only scholar to have done ethnographic field work on explicitly Hindutva organizations in Nepal. According to her dissertation research, the Matribhumi Seva Sangh (MSS) and Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) emerged in the 1980’s from a split within the Nepali RSS (sister to the Indian RSS). The HSS has maintained close ties to the Indian *sangh parivar*, while the MSS is more autonomous and ‘nationalistic’ in outlook (2005, 49). King’s research focused on the MSS, and in particular on its network of Hindutva-oriented schools in the Kathmandu Valley – the Hindu Vidyanath Nepal (founded in 1985). King relates the ‘spiritual’ training in the school to a “cleansing and taming” (127) of young people who are exposed to the temptations of modern life. What she describes is quite close to the Indian Hindutva model of school-shakha-mandir that I alluded to above. However, what is also clear from her account is that this was an experience aimed at the upper middle classes and castes (219). In King’s view, the schools promoted a kind of exotic version of ‘holistic Asian values’ to attract funding from British charities and invited British volunteers to teach. This is obviously not a viable model for mass Hindutva in Nepal.

The split between the MSS and HSS appears to have been mirrored in the split between the Shiva Sena, Nepal and Nepali Shiva Sena, in the 1990s. Again, the issue was whether to align with India explicitly, or maintain a pro-monarchical stance. A similar clash of interests probably led to the killing of popular Hindu preacher Narayan Prasad Pokhrel (Nepali Times 2005). His case is quite revealing, as the consensus points to an alliance of Indian RSS and traditionalist Nepali religious leaders being involved in his

³⁴ As the above-mentioned local RPP cadre put it “why are priests going around wearing Gucci sunglasses?”

death, because his popular base, derived from public religious speeches, was *too large*. Whether such specific allegations are true or not, the fact that they ring true to many shows how neither Indian agents nor Nepali traditionalists have been keen to allow indigenous, mass Hinduism emerge in Nepal, beyond their control³⁵. This is unlike the model of the *sangh parivar* in India which has harnessed and co-opted popular religious sentiments (for better or worse) rather than undermined them.

The lack of a mass ‘social’ dimension, or an inadequate one, was referenced both by Hindutva activists and their opponents. In Biratnagar a Muslim leader argued that Hindutva demonstrations in the border region were driven by “invitations from upper caste associations” in the Nepali Terai, who are using the RSS and its affiliates in India to bully local minorities (especially Muslims) when they stand for political office. In other words, elites are using those organizations in ways that harken back to feudal landlords hiring *gundas* (heavymen) to defend their traditional status and power. Hindutva activists denied this type of ‘traditional’ power play but admitted that the social dimension of Nepali organizations was far behind the *sangh parivar* in India. One activist (for the Hindu Yuva Vahini) argued that intensive social welfarism, such as work with the poor and with lower castes, was “part of the RSS’ larger political strategy” and that this was not needed or possible yet in Nepal where no such larger strategy yet existed. An activist in Janakpur was more optimistic about building a social welfarist base, but argued that this wouldn’t see fruition for “five to ten years”.

Conclusion: Obstacles to the Localization of Hindutva in Nepal and the ‘Vaccination effect’

Table 1, below, aims to summarize and generalize the ecosystem of ‘Hindutvas’ currently relevant in Nepal.

Table 1

Characteristics	Indian Hindutva (the ‘ideal type’)	‘Popular Hindutva’ in Nepal	‘Royal Hindutva’ in Nepal
Religious homogenization / reform?	Yes	Some	None/little
Social welfare / disciplinary aspects?	Yes	Sporadic evidence of orphanages, temple restoration	Only for professionals who are congregants at

³⁵ This incident also fits journalist Yubraj Ghimire’s observation (personal interview July 2023) that for Indian agents at work in Nepal, short term Indian interests will always trump Nepali Hindutva, even if that means undermining the organizations that might grow an organic Nepali Hindutva.

		linked to Hindutva.	ashrams and Arya Samaj.
Xenophobia?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Target of xenophobia	Muslims and Christians	Muslims	Christians
Base of support	Increasingly broad across caste / ethnicity / region	Upper and middle castes in Terai region	Upper and middle castes in Kathmandu Valley
Organizational Structure	Shakha-school-mandir model and synergetic sangh parivar organizations, with BJP taking political lead	Fragmentary RSS-imitating organizations	Traditionalist organizations, pro-monarchy parties (the RPP) , demagogic outsiders
Ideological Aims	Insert Hindutva philosophy and practice into the state at every level; encourage / coerce conversion of non-Hindus ‘back’ into Hinduism	Protest against secular constitution; protest against supposed growth of Islam in Terai region	Protest against secular constitution and against federalism and for monarchy; protest against Christian conversions

This table suggests that the Indian Hindutva ‘model’ has not yet been localized successfully in Nepal. No synergetic movement-organization yet exists because fundamental aims and methods differ between organizations. In particular, bridging the divide between a ‘royal Hindutva’ focused on bringing back the monarchy and defending caste-hierarchical religion and a ‘popular Hindutva’ which is indifferent to the monarchy will be very challenging for Hindutva entrepreneurs in Nepal. A compromise would require one side to sacrifice fundamental preferences.

The blockages faced by Indian-style Hindutva resonate with the idea of ‘vaccination’ by traditionalism, mentioned by Lipset (1971) in the context of Nazi Germany and by Arzheimer and Carter (2009) in the context of the radical right and traditional Catholicism in Eastern Europe. In these cases (and perhaps we could add Wagemakers, 2020 account of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan), ‘traditional’ religion acts as a kind of ‘vaccine’ to more extreme but ideologically adjacent belief systems. Traditionalists, embedded in local religious networks and committed to existing hierarchies are less likely to be won over by demotic religious ideologies. In Nepal’s case, an upper caste, traditionalist belief system and localistic practices act as a barrier to a homogenized, demotic, xenophobic Hinduism as increasingly seen in India.

A number of factors will determine whether this changes in the future, including the possibility of a slow erosion of Nepal’s traditional religious infrastructure (a weakening

of the ‘vaccine’) perhaps as result of Nepal’s high rate of mass migration and the concomitant return of migrant workers deracinated from experiences overseas and more inclined to homogenized religious practice. More unpredictable could be the emergence of religious-political entrepreneurs whose charisma (hitherto not seen) could bridge incompatible ‘hindutvas’ described above.

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