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Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India by
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If you have any interest in Japan in the Tokugawa period, read this book. There is much to ponder in it, and I can think of no way of praising it more highly.

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Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India. By ARVIND RAJAGOPAL. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. viii, 393.

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In the burgeoning literature dealing with the meteoric rise of Hindutva in the subcontinent, there has been a conspicuous absence of monographs specifically analysing the influence of the media on Hindu nationalist mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s. *Politics after Television* helps to eliminate this deficit. The book presents a densely researched and carefully argued analysis of the interaction between electronic and print media and the startling success of the ideologies of Hindutva in the 1980s and 1990s. Each of its major themes are presented in parallel: the political context of a disintegrating Congress, economic liberalization and growth of the market; the consequent transformation of the place of television media in the public sphere; the running of the Ramayana serial by Doordarshan and, most crucially, the 'split' response to the Ram Janmabhumi movement in the print media. Rajagopal rounds off this *tour de force* with an illuminating study of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its support base in the United States. *Politics after Television* represents a relatively new departure in interpretations of Hindutva in its emphasis on Hindu nationalism as part of a 'passive' revolution, whose fortunes have been determined largely by the specific contexts of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than approaching Hindutva through its historical or institutional transformations, or as a 'nationalist' agenda of evolving ideological strategies, Rajagopal examines its success in terms of the market and media environment. As a consequence, the late 1980s and 1990s were the specific historical moment for the author, 'wherein a different relationship between communication and public participation was made possible by three factors: the growth of new media; the expansion of the market; and the legitimation crisis of political authority.' (p. 273). Hindutva is represented as a contradictory and internally inconsistent phenomenon, not easily structured by theories of ideological strategy or institutional development. Whilst this approach offers some startling insights into the connections between the media and the mobilizations of political ideology, the de-emphasis of Hindutva's historical context occasionally undermines the attempt to represent Hindu nationalism as institutionally and ideologically fractured.

Central to Rajagopal's overall argument in the introduction and first chapter, is the idea of a new media regime accompanying economic liberalization, which produced a 'structural set of mutual misperceptions'. The

advent of television and the electronic media serves partly to mask societal divisions. Yet Rajagopal shows that a closer analysis of the media reveals diversified meanings that are appropriated through what is described as the 'split public'—a theme which appears with more force in later discussions of print media. It is argued that the fluidity in interpretations of television images helps to explain the internally contradictory nature of political regimes that mobilized around them. Rajagopal's free employment of Gramsci's thinking on political regimes and civil societies here is curious against his on-going assertion that the meanings of media and political messages are contextually contingent. Gramsci's own context is not included. Nevertheless, the argument is attractive: The split public which the new media environment exhibited was seized upon by Hindu nationalists, taking advantage of a structural set of mutual misperceptions between English-language elites and those of regional languages. A residual problem would seem to be that Hindu nationalism is being represented here as both instrumental and the passive recipient of a set of conditions arising with the free market and liberalized communications. What was the decisive moment for Hindu nationalism, if such a moment can be identified, and how far was it determined by strategic decisions surrounding the Ram Janmabhumi movement? Rajagopal, perhaps deliberately, never resolves this conundrum.

Instead, he prioritizes the broad relationship between the rise of Hindutva and changes in the market economy in the 1980s. The core of the argument is that liberalization contributed to the development of a political vacuum in the late 1980s, providing Hindu nationalism with an electoral and propagandistic opportunity. The post-Emergency dilemma of the Congress and the 'structural crisis of the Indian state' are seen as central to this process, allowing the BJP to offer a 'cultural and ideological accompaniment' to liberalization, infusing it with religio-mythical narratives for popular consumption. Yet there is another paradox here. There was no guarantee that the rise of consumer culture, and the appropriation of consumer styles would favour the specific projects of the BJP. Rajiv Gandhi also placated Hindu nationalist opinion in his sponsorship of mythological films and the Congress as a whole had experienced an intermittent engagement with Hindu populism. The crisis of the Indian state argument helps to explain the rise of the institution of the BJP. But accounting for the appeal of Hindu nationalism involves different questions. The very 'internally incoherent' character of Hindutva's appeal, as described by the author, allowed Hindu nationalist ideologies to operate in more diffuse ways—broader in scope and not explicitly tied to the Sangh Parivar in all contexts. It was a Congress government which initially sponsored the serialization of the Ramayana in 1987—a move which represented a clear break from the policy of religious neutrality in state-sponsored broadcasting. Rajagopal's evidence suggests that the net of Hindu nationalism was cast much wider than the institutions selected by this book.

The broad appeal of Hindu nationalism is aptly illustrated in the second and third chapters, in which Rajagopal presents a richly researched and highly entertaining account of the serialization of Ramanand Sagar's

Ramayana by Doordarshan. With the rapid expansion of electronic media in the late 1980s and the onset of satellite, it was increasingly difficult to restrict religious themes in broadcasting content. The parallel with the liberalization process is clear. But the serialization of the Ramayana was particularly startling in the manner in which the idea of a unified 'Hindu culture' was projected onto the message of the epic. Commentators on the serial asserted that the all-embracing values of the Ramayana, and of 'Hinduism' itself brought together previously separated realms. This process too has a history: long-standing, regionally diverse traditions in religious story-telling involved the reproduction of the Ramayana in forms such as the *katha*. The idea of the Ramayana as a congregational experience that engaged with the political sphere through Hindu nationalist rhetoric, had been a project of earlier nationalists, and not exclusively those of the Hindu right. S. S. Gill, the retired secretary to the Ministry of Information, stated in 1988 that 'In his search for an expressive metaphor to symbolize a welfare state of his dreams, Gandhiji could do no better than think of Ram Raj.' (p. 85). An investigation of Congress meetings in north India in the 1930s and 1940s would reveal the recurrent political re-adaptation of Ramayana imagery, in speeches and public processions. Congress leaders of the left, such as Sampurnanand commended the use of such rhetoric in political mobilization. The significance of the Ramayana for political ideology was not only institutionally broad (Rajagopal mentions how Rajiv Gandhi employed the actor who played Ram to raise crowds in a bye-election for Congress), but also had important historical precedents. The theme of *Politics after Television*, that electronic media transforms the context of politics and acts as the 'backdrop, stage and vehicle of social interaction', changing the constraints within which politics takes place, is tightly argued. It is illustrated in Chapter Five by the connections made between the serialization with its setting up of a new visual regime and the public responses to similar visual dimensions in the Ram Janmabhumi movement. These visual and theatrical regimes had historical precedents worthy of further consideration, and were not confined solely to the mobilizations of the Hindu right. Nor would social scientists and historians of the Hindu right necessarily agree that it was only in the 1980s that Hindu religious practices came to be defined for the first time as acts of national citizenship (p. 67).

The explanations of television's power, as a mechanism that 'processes time', creating a decentred 'multi-layered flow' (p. 129) combine well with Rajagopal's arguments about symbolic politics. But it is in his study of the print media that some of the most exciting pieces of research can be found. Here, the idea of the 'split public' is unpacked—the concept of different languages of politics circulating in incompletely overlapping spheres. This neat analysis allows the author to transform the worn dichotomy of elite and subaltern by emphasizing translation between the split levels, rather than asserting the sovereignty of one over the other. Compared with television, the print media 'allows for a fuller engagement with the experiences conveyed' (p. 155). This immediately raises the question as to how far this engagement has been transformed since the explosion of electronic media,

and to what extent the print coverage of Ram Janmabhumi really represented a new departure for the press in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, Rajagopal's delineation of the 'split public' produces fruitful results. Whilst for the English-language press, Ram Janmabhumi was essentially inexplicable, the Hindi papers' proximity to religious symbolism demonstrated a more direct emotional engagement with the movement. This contrast is characterized by Rajagopal in multiple forms—the 'dispersed' nature of Hindi press comment against the more consolidated English-language papers, or the essentially nationalist Hindi interpretation versus the neo-colonial English. This again begs the question of how far these differences can be seen in earlier phases. The 'structured set of misperceptions' arising from this split media might be seen as an enduring phenomenon, appearing in earlier phases of print journalism in India. Religious symbolism appeared in the burgeoning Hindi press of the 1920s and 1930s, and was frequently decried by colonial reporters. For Rajagopal, the important point is that the 'structured misperceptions' of the 1990s were directly exploited by the Sangh Parivar. Young reporters were cultivated, their material insecurity exploited with BJP gifts. The selling power of communal sensationalism was harnessed to the Sangh's political chariot. In a limited sense, the split media was managed by the Hindu right. During his *rath yatra* Ram Advani represented himself as devotee of Ram to the Hindi press, and as politician for the English-language papers. The distance between the Hindi and English presses became 'a strategic resource' for Hindu nationalists. Yet the central argument that the context of television media transformed the nature of this distance is not explicitly demonstrated. Rather, Rajagopal's arguments about print media stand alone, offering a wealth of new material and a unique insight into the image-machine of the Sangh Parivar.

Chapter 6 presents a fascinating insight into the nature of VHP organization and activity in the United States. Its perceptive and entertaining accounts of the predicament of the Non Resident Indians are based on first-hand experience—partly the fruit of the author's involvement in a three-day camp of the Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh. In this chapter, Hindutva is represented less as a global phenomenon than as a force moulding itself to the particular cultural crises of South Asian experiences in the States: The problems of parental control, racial hierarchies, and a coming to terms with the 'dollar or dharma' dilemma. The arguments concerning racial self-perception are particularly useful in representing the varied success of Hindutva ideologies and institutions amongst the diaspora. These variants, and hence our understanding of the VHP's global project might have been enriched through comparisons with other diasporic communities. Rajagopal emphasizes the point that great differences in responses to Hindu nationalism can be seen between first-generation and later Indian immigrants. Against this argument, specific comparisons with the earlier emigrants to the U.K. would be instructive, especially as the Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh has a longer history there. Since racial thinking is also central to this study, where 'Indian immigrants' assertion of Indian/Hindu identity were indissociable from their experience of racial marginalization in the U.S.' (p. 268), the 'more hostile racial environment' of the U.K.

would surely have provided an interesting counterpoise. Indeed, the study of the VHP's financial contribution to Indian projects, and the nature of its global organization could be compared to other contexts, for example the Parishad's fund-raising activities in South Africa, or the appeal of Hindu nationalism amongst Indians in the Gulf, East Africa or Mauritius. These spatial comparisons would surely enrich this unique study of the United States presented by Rajagopal, as would temporal analyses: the 1993 'Global Vision 2000' held in Washington—the centenary of Vivekananda's appearance in Chicago—paralleled many of the arguments of the 1893 Parliament of Religions. Vivekananda's comparison of the contrasting 'feminine' and 'masculine' *shakti* worship of East and West at that conference foreshadowed the dharmic/materialist dichotomy a century later.

In the conclusion to this book, Rajagopal refers to the argument of V. P. Singh in 1991, that other parties too could 'claim Ram' (p. 271). An unexplored theme seems to be exposed here: one which compares the content of Hindu nationalist motifs—its symbol manipulation—with institutions and parties outside the main right-wing institutions. This theme is crucial to understandings of the political and ideological relationships between Congress, regional parties and Hindutva. Recent interpretations, including Rajagopal's, have highlighted the 'hiatus' following Congress's fall from power to help explain the similar electoral bases and national aspirations of the Congress and BJP. The latter is described as filling the Congress vacuum with its assumptions of high caste Hindu 'majoritarianism'. Yet, given the sophistication with which Rajagopal has delineated the intrusion of Hindu nationalist motifs into civil society and the splintered nature of its media environment, as well as its relationship to marketing and consumption patterns, one might expect the book to offer more diversified explanations for the ideological reach of Hindu nationalism. The research helps Rajagopal to unravel the original argument that the Ramayana serial served as a 'moment of condensation' (p. 278) for diverse and divided publics in the subcontinent, translating public responses at certain historical junctures into an artificial sense of Hindu unity. But the question remains as to how far the sense of a tolerant, 'scientific' Hinduism is attributable to the Sangh Parivar. *Politics after Television* accepts the assumption that a monolithic view of the Nehruvian developmental Congress was replaced by a new kind of all-encompassing rhetoric belonging to the Hindu right. Although Rajagopal shows how this new political language drew upon the performative character of politics and, in recognition of the ideas of Gramsci, was limited and 'make-shift', the diffusion of such a political language outside the Hindu right is left to the reader's imagination. This would seem to be a potential area of further exploration in the face of the BJP's capricious electoral base, and the breadth of the religious symbolism so carefully described in this book. The opening discussion of *Politics after Television* indicates the author's awareness of these implications without fully unravelling them: 'Paying attention to the language of politics offers a way of contesting the stereotype of Hindutva as a separable and aberrant phenomenon somehow existing apart from the mainstream of nationalist politics' (p. 2).

Despite these unresolved questions, the originality and sophistication with which this book approaches the changing nature of the language of

politics in India means that it will probably represent one of the more important studies of Hindutva to appear for a number of years. Other historians and commentators on the Hindu right in the subcontinent and beyond may well dispute Rajagopal's emphases on the themes of market and media, tied explicitly to the specific historical juncture of the late 1980s and 1990s. Alternative contexts for this turbulent period would include the massive increase in sectarian violence across north India from the late 1970s and the growth of regional separatist movements in the early 1980s. Research into the 1940s to 1970s also questions the extent to which the Nehruvian consensus was ever entirely consensual, or a period in which despite electoral fortunes, the ideologies of Hindu nationalism were voiceless. In the two decades following Independence in U.P., the Hindu traditionalist voice was a strong and lingering one within the state Congress and governments. The theme of 'Integral Humanism' in the political thought of RSS leader Deendayal Upadhyaya in the 1960s appropriated elements of Gandhianism—perhaps foreshadowing the flexibility and adaptability of Hindu nationalist ideology in the 1990s. The inter-relationship between the ideological and mobilizational forms of the Hindu right and other parties is an area of research that a study such as Rajagopal's opens up. The book makes this plainly clear in stating that 'the interaction between the Congress and the BJP is an intricate story, pointing to the shared social bases and overlapping histories of the two parties' (p. 58). Nevertheless, in selecting the original and relatively intangible theme of media and its popular consumption, *Politics after Television* will undoubtedly spawn a renewed interest and thought-provoking discussion into the manufacture of political images and the language of politics in South Asia.

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