



## Sadhus in Indian Politics

---

Mr. Rajat Kohly  
Independent Researcher, Meerut

***Sadhus in Indian Politics* (Author: Koushiki Dasgupta), Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2021**

This is an authentic text which covers various dimensions of ascetics involvement in politics, particularly post independent politics. As the full title of the text 'Sadhus in Indian Politics: Dynamics of hindutva' suggests that this text not only conveys us the evolution of ascetics participation in national freedom struggle in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to power politics in 1980's but parallel etymological evolution of word hindutva since it was first used by Chandranath Basu . Author Koushiki Dasgupta is professor of history at Vidyasagar University, West Bengal and the views expressed in the text is part of her research on the changing pattern of Hindu politics in post independence India.

Contents of the text includes a preface and acknowledgements followed by an introduction and four chapters namely, Seva, Sangathan and Hindutva; 'Traditional' Sadhus in Hindutva Politics, (Re) Making of Hindutva; New- Age Gurus, and at the end it consist Epilogue, Bibliography, About the author and Index. BJP led NDA government which we see today as majoritarian has got something to do with the sadhus backing them in 1980's and 90's and the dynamics we see today at the national level started moulding since the Vishwa Hindu Parishad-RSS-BJP trio acquiring the discourse of hindutva along with the sadhus who are less concern about politics but more about ramjanmbhoomi and ethical, moral aspects of hindutva which is their interest and for the sake of that interest they had no other option than the trio which represents dominant discourse of hindutva against few less dominant, one of them in opposition to the former established party namely, Ram Rajya Parishad and his founder yogi turned politician Swami karpatri

Maharaj. Author seek answer of few important questions one among them is 'Did the politics of hindutva in india ensure an 'alternative world' which sadhus wanted to make?', this question itself justifies the sadhus leaving thier isolation and their participation in power politics and hence by acquiring power they make the world which would be in notion of hindutva. I think that the 'alternative world' which sadhus seek in accordance with author is the world of peace and tranquility, where every existence would see the same existence in others where this sukti of Upanishad 'Sarvam khalu idam Brahman' itself portrays the same atman in everyone. Kaelber identified five categories of asceticism in relation to ascetics interaction with existing culture, one among them is asceticism as transformer of culture, this seems to be the theoretical premises of author when she talks about 'alternative world'.

Introduction of the book delivers broader understanding of chapters following introduction and also tries to elaborate the title of the book. Initially in the introduction author, by taking cognizance of Jurgen habermas' statement that 'by intentionally ostracizing religion from politics, modern society has lost one of its powerful moral resources', putted forth how politics bereft of religion making western countries loose morality and ethics. In spite of above statement author in very next paragraph becomes paradoxical by saying that symbols and values added to religion makes it malleable for politicians to mould it in a way they want. Author sees 'politics' in this book as rajdharma rather than rajniti because when dharma is added to prefix than it becomes symbolic of duty/responsibility. Although author had tried to explain the 'hindutva' as 'the way of life and state of mind' of a hindu but couldn't erased the confusion with the evolution of word 'hindutva' and how can't we consider it at par with Hinduism is not also clearly explained. She has described the Savarkar's definition of hindutva as misleading which shows the ignorance of author as Savarkar had described three standards of being a Hindu which are broad enough to touch dimensions of every possible definition of Hindu till now has given. Chandranath Basu first used the term 'Hindutva', he used it in context of writing an authentic history of Hindus. Supreme court's verdict on definition of 'Hindutva' defined it as 'Indianization or Bhartiyakaran' of Indian culture. Author thinks that 'Hindutva' became a subject of political construction when BJP deployed it for the political gains and to mobilize the people particularly low caste groups by presenting hindutva agenda as the construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya, repealing of article 370 and assurance to introduce Uniform Civil Code, Sadhus played significant role in taking down the discourse of hindutva to common man and to remind them of their identity. What pushed the author for further research is the question: did political hindutva fully absorb the sadhus, or did the latter manage to enjoy their power and authority when they participate in hindutva project voluntarily?, we later in the third chapter see how Vishwa Hindu

Parishad played critical role in making the bond between sadhus and political parties. Ramjanmbhoomi case pushed sadhus towards BJP- RSS-VHP trio as they were the forces carrying hindutva dominant discourse and since 1853 sadhus from Nirmohi Akhara claiming ownership of Babri masjid site so it naturally manifests sadhus tilts toward mentioned trio. Against the colonial connotation of effeminate Hindus/Bengalis, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and M.K.Gandhi participated in building up the ascetic nationalist understanding.

While describing the M.S.Golwalkar's two options before the foreign races, author called M.S.Golwalkar as the first sarsanghchalak of RSS on page no. 19. I was wondering that she has done extensive research work on role of sanyasis, RSS, VHP in moulding politics in post independent India and than after this mistake of considering M.S.Golwalkar as first sarsanghchalak inspite of K.B.Hedgewar whose name has been mentioned in the book couple of times. I was not expecting this sort of mistake by her.

In the first chapter of the book, how sadhus deployed the art of seva and sangathan as primary sites for political mobilization has been described by the case study of an organization initially started from Bengal and gradually expanded to the whole world namely, Bharat Sevashram Sangha(BSS) formed by Swami Pranavananda. Author at a place rightly mentioned that our ancient culture has no voluntary seva institution or concept like such, Infact it is western contribution to us as we use to have the system of 'dan' and 'bheek' and it is needless to say that their is a difference between the above mentioned. Practising universal seva is a means for hindu sadhus who wanted to reach the masses, they followed the tradition established by vedantist like Vivekananda whose ideas of Advaita says 'Nar seva hi Narayan seva'. After the establishment of BSS in 1923 it started reaching people in villages for understanding grievances of rural population and coming with redressel, it seems us the first seva oriented organisation committed to the cause of Hindu nationalism in the countryside of Bengal. BSS symbolized the epitome of service, spirituality and hindu sangathan but it's equation with mainstream hindutva forces remain unsettled, three themes from the array of thoughts were 1) reconfiguring caste society through seva 2) reverberating facades of bengali- non bengali identity 3) reflecting tensions faced by RSS- VHP in Bengal. BSS attracting lower caste group against the upper caste which was tilted towards RSS- VHP and youngsters got attracted towards by seeing the ashrams arranged by BSS at several pilgrimage place where they often see volunteers speaking bengali and seek their identity and than ready to devote their life in seva.

Second chapter menifests the conflict between traditional orthodox sadhus(sanatan)

and modern democratic politics(reformers). Two writers namely, journalist-cum-writer Dharendra K. Jha(explored the secretive world of Nagas sadhu), Rajesh pradhan seeks the answer of, how the sadhus stepped into the muddled world of party politics in independent India. Accusation has been made by author on RSS-VHP of making the hindutva ethno-cultural monochromatic form of hindutva. This chapter portrays the case study of Swami Karpatri Maharaj and his political party namely, Ram rajya Parishad (RRP) which at first general elections contested election as an ally of Bhartiya jan sangh and showed considerable influence on hindi north belt states; Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya pradesh, RRP won 4 seats in first general elections and some 23 seats in Rajasthan legislative assembly but gradually it wiped out from active politics. It's theoretical premises are based on one single man who was conservatist, orthodox and sanatanist regarding his ideas towards hindutva and leader of anti cow slaughter movement, vocal for ayurvedic medicine and against any sort of movement against untouchability which is the point of dissension between Swami Karpatri led RRP and Dr.Shyama prasad Mukherjee led Bhartiya jan sangh and non political organization RSS.

Professor Hilal Ahmed claimed that RRP took a prominent part in raising the Ayodhya ramjanmbhoomi issue for the first time in history but didn't include it in their manifesto for the first general elections, author also called out an incident when a local mazar near Babri masjid was demolished in 1949, followed by a 9 day uninterrupted 'Akhand Path' of the Ramcharitmanas around the site organized by Swami Karpatri and Baba Raghav das. Sanatanist tried to made universal Hinduism by obliterating the division between sects by emphasising integrating elements, it also described how guru-disciple relations are hampering hindu rashtra since many sects come out of this where blind followers only see the way there guru wants them to see and this is a threat to democratic principle since it menifests the dictatorial principle where followers are ready to conform to any directions given to them. When author explain a dichotomy between sanatanist inclined towards politics and Hindu nationalist, it is difficult to bifurcate their ideas as sanatanist coming into influence of politics would come out with the similar ideas as putted forth by Hindu nationalist, so here there is need to explain it bit more and come out with clarity. Title of the chapter namely, Traditional sadhus in hindutva politics has less to do with content it incorporates and it seems me as misnomer title.

Third chapter brings out the inner tension in Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the relationship VHP shared with the sadhus puts up the conflict of interest in making Hindu rashtra. VHP was especially established as an ally of RSS to promote the cause of Hindu religion and culture at global level because RSS realized the limitations against open playing of religious card, Infact M.S.Gowalkar joined the VHP in its initial phase, In its 'sammelan' question is raised regarding taking the

ideals of Hinduism to ground level and for the purposes pracharak of RSS were considered because as the sanyasis infused a sense of self-restraint and regulation so has been done by the pracharaks, Golwalkar was a radical sadhu and he organised a vast network of dedicated activists as pracharaks and command of overseas missionary was given to Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Dayananda, Swami Satyamitranand. Presence of Shankaracharya's in VHP conference took the Brahmanical sanatani close to VHP but it didn't sustain. In BJP's victory or popularising hindutva agenda, sanyasis played critical role and in return their demands were also considered by political organization and it is needless to say how religion is influencing the politics today. Two days dharm sansad held in kumbha Mela congregation in 2019 manifests the conflict between VHP and ABAP, collective body of 13 sadhus akharas, this conflict was on providing the electoral benefits to BJP for the longest time since VHP has been carrying the dominant discourse of hindutva and have become sole incharge.

I felt while reading this chapter that again the title of this chapter is a misnomer, since the content it incorporates has less to do with the title namely, (Re)making of Hindutva,

Again, I wonder if I should say this or not but I have to say that it seems as author has less understanding of RSS organisation since at a place she said that 'connection of M.S.Golwalkar and VHP made VHP less popular because of fascist image of Golwalkar', here we can't forget that VHP was established as subsidiary ally of RSS and it might be the brain's child of Golwalkar' since he was the sarsanghchalak at that point of time.

In last chapter of this book we see the scenerio of after liberalisation, information and technological boom that how hindutva is becoming universal since life style of the whole world is becoming concomitant with the ways hindu has been living since the time immemorial and whole world has been taking inspiration from the way hindu live.

It is a fact that gurus and sadhus have negotiated with neo-liberal india but the sustained importance of hindutva seems paradoxical in this transnational networks, they know the vocabulary of new urban professional classes that this brought them into the drawing rooms of these classes through electronic media channels and microblogging sites. Gurus, today assist in propagating Hindu nationalism by producing and selling of spiritual commodities, In this way religion is reframed as spirituality to support the trends of market capitalism, it seems as if economic forces are taking over cultural space. Gurus, other than addressing cosmopolitan audience over media platforms they engrossed themselves in philanthropic activities like yoga and meditation programmes, caste-class empowerment programme and

healthcare programmes but this has nothing to do with active politics what John Zavos has labelled as 'informal politics of social action'. New-age hindutva revolve around the activities of sangh parivar leaving aside universal gurus of neo-liberal age. Upanishadic and vedantic knowledge is the tools in the hands of new-age gurus which is philosophical crux of apu ancient knowledge, a whole section of this chapter is devoted to Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, famously known as Sadhguru, founder of Isha foundation operating in whole world today, made the delegate of various international peace and economic conferences namely, US Millenium Peace Summit, World Peace Congress and World Economic Forum at Davos. SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR has also been described in the last section of chapter who is the founder of Art of Living Foundation which is educational-philanthropic organization present in 156 countries.

This book incorporates the evolution of Sadhu and sanyasis making their way in national and regional politics for influencing the policies which they want should be in accordance with hindutva culture and based on our ancient knowledge as Swami Karpatri wanted the statecraft in concomitance with Ram rajya for the purpose he made political party, Ram Rajya Parishad(RRP), there are leaders who are devoted to seva and had less to do with politics as Swami Pranavananda and his organisation, Bharat Sevashram Sangha(BSS) working initially in Bengal and than propagated to whole world.

Role of RSS-BJP-VHP trio in taking the sadhus in political domain and sadhus dreaming of making an 'alternative world' drifted them towards political hindutva from cultural hindutva which never vanishes from their head entirely that's why we see the conflict rising between organisation such as RRP and BJP-RSS, BSS-RSS.

Although this book is beneficial for the scholars who want to trace the engrossment of sadhus in Indian politics and almost touches all the dimensions of sadhuism popular in twentieth century and thier interference in politics but I think author lacks the understanding of paricular organisations namely; RSS, VHP since as I discussed it earlier that at a place author describes M.S. Golwalkar as first sirsanghchhalak of RSS and his links to VHP is considered as defamatory for VHP.

There is a space for future reserach in the topic and this book can be a predecessor of the successive research, while reading this book I could sense the gap when it comes to sadhus involving in politics voluntarily or through the fear of Hindu ideals disappearing presented by political organizations for electoral gains and whether ideals carrying by new-age gurus belong to the hindu tradition of earlier sanyasis or blend of all the philosophies popular out there prevailing.