Nature in a ‘Hindu’ Nation: Cows, Dams, and the Green-Saffron Nexus

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................. 3

Executive Summary.................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 1: Introduction.......................................................................................................... 8

Chapter 2: Intimate and Spectacular Modes of the Cow Protection Movement...................... 23

Chapter 3: Regional Modernities, Hindutva, and Dam Building............................................ 52

Chapter 4: Green-Saffron Alliances....................................................................................... 75

Chapter 5: Conclusion............................................................................................................ 97

Bibliography............................................................................................................................ 103
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Executive Summary

This thesis contributes to literature that examines the pivotal role nature plays in making and unmaking conceptions of nationhood. My empirical focus is on the Indian context, in which I investigate entwined strands of Hindu nationalist and green thinking, or what Mukul Sharma terms the green-saffron nexus, whereby the saffron color connotes efforts to Hinduize India’s political, social, and cultural institutions. I expand on and complicate Sharma’s analysis by attending to three facets of Indian environmental politics: cow protection, dam construction, and coalition building between Hindutva affiliates and left-orientated environmentalists. Drawing on these case studies, my thesis addresses the following questions: How and to what extent do Hindu nationalism and Indian environmental politics intersect? What is at stake when nature protection and Hindutva discourses are interwoven? And how do progressive environmental activists grapple with convergences and divergences between right-wing Hindu and environmental movements?

In addressing these questions, I aim to expand the green-saffron nexus by illuminating its “multi-scalar” dimensions and their political effects. My analysis of cow protection and dam building reveals two types of scale: intimate and spectacular as well as regional and national. Through grounding my research in micro (intimate and regional) and macro (spectacular and national) scales, I show that intersections between green and saffron are neither predetermined nor inevitable; rather, they take on contingent and shifting forms. I highlight, however, the contiguity between these distinct pathways. Using a feminist geopolitical lens, I demonstrate how even disparate manifestations of the green-saffron relationship enable the consolidation of a Hindu state. I contend that if activists hope to counter the green-saffron nexus, they must recognize the workings of Hindutva at different scales and spaces of Indian environmental politics.

These scale-shifts make visible commitments to nature among right-wing Hindu actors that ‘progressive’ environmentalists’ themselves hold, which complicates the prospect of green-saffron alliances. I demonstrate that progressive activists are forced to make trade-offs in the process of cooperating or opposing Hindu Right elements within environmental movements. At the dyadic levels of coalition building, including between individuals and organizations, such cost-benefit analyses are necessarily fraught, as individual environmentalists attempt to square personal values, interpersonal relations, an ethos of environmental justice and inclusion, and movement goals, which can render resistance to Hinduizing forces more challenging, uncertain, and inconsistent. Ultimately, however, I demonstrate that environmental activists are actively wrestling with the unwieldy connections between Hindu Right and environmental movements, and are doing so in creative, pragmatic, and empathic ways.

I analyze contemporary cow protection and dam building movements using two primary frameworks: the intimate and spectacular as well as regional and national respectively. I employ the intimate-spectacular framework to explore how cow protectionism manifests at individual and national levels, in private and public realms. The co-determined relationship between the two is elucidated by Rachel Pain and Susan Smith’s (2008) concept of the double helix, a motif that represents the interconnected strands of the geopolitical and the everyday. I then illuminate the geographic scale of the green-saffron nexus—that is, the regional dimensions of this relationship. I compare Hinduizing discourses in relation to support for the Sardar Sarovar
Project (SSP) in the state of Gujarat and opposition to the Tehri Dam in the state of Uttarakhand. Here, I employ the regional modernities analytic conceptualized by K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal (2003) to explain paradoxical assertions of Hindu nationalist ideology in the two dam building case studies. The regional modernities lens puts forth that modern phenomena, including ideologies such as Hindu nationalism, hinge on historical, social, and material realities that circulate within specific contexts. Yet even these situated nationalist formations, and the opposing ways in which they intersect with nature, are connected across space and time.

Chapter Two examines India’s cow protection movement. Amid growing sectarian tensions, India has witnessed a concomitant rise in cow vigilante attacks—paroxysms of violence targeted primarily at lower-caste Hindus and Muslims. This chapter, however, adopts a broader view of cow protection, seeking to unveil the micropolitics of the movement. Using the double helix concept, I argue that the intimate and spectacular levels are separate but interlocking realms of bovine politics.

To begin, I look at the historical antecedents of the contemporary cow protection movement. Here, I underscore that the sacred cow symbol serves as a metonymic projection of the Hindu rashtra (nation): Saving the cow equates to saving the nation. I show that cow protection advocates have drawn on secular reasoning (e.g., environmental benefits and economic rationality) as well as socio-religious arguments to buoy anti-slaughter legislation. Yet these efforts are troubled by the economic infeasibility of a national beef ban. It is instead through ‘intimate turns’ that we come to see how the emotional and rational, symbolic and material elements of human-bovine relations are interwoven; this is because cow protection at the individual level is grounded in interactions with real bovine animals. Such relations engender intimacies that give rise to an ethic of care. I show that ahimsa (non-violence), animal love, and care are not antithetical to discriminatory forms of vegetarianism; rather, through the mechanism of moral disgust they enable the Hindu Right’s political use of disgust. I then shed light on explicit openings in the intimate-spectacular double helix, which become apparent when the holy cow metaphor is situated within national identity constructions. A politics of hurt, desire for authenticity, and quest for dignity connect intimate and spectacular spaces in dynamic relation. What becomes apparent, in this respect, are the mutually enhancing ties between different scales of cow protectionism.

The intimate-spectacular framework invites us to rethink not just cow protection but also the overarching green-saffron nexus in which the movement is located. When the relationship between Hindu nationalism and nature is examined at national and individual levels, we begin to see its distinct manifestations: its spectacularly violent expressions but also its more subtle formations contingent on love, care, and non-violence. These are ideals animal protection organizations, including, for example, The Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations (FIAPO), uphold. FIAPO has publicly denounced the Hindu Right’s cow protection project. But by attending to different scales, and recognizing how environmental commitments sit alongside and actively contribute to the green-saffron nexus, groups like FIAPO may be poised to resist the multiple intersections between nature, violence, and Hindutva.

Chapter Three examines the SSP and Tehri dam building case studies using the regional modernities analytic. I first highlight that space--both built and natural--occupies an important
place in Hindu nationalist imagination. This point is evidenced in Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s dam disputes. I first note the environmental stakes of the SSP and Tehri dam, and point out competing environmental narratives at play in both dam building movements. I then outline key regional elements of Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s social geographies, arguing that Hindu nationalism as an emergent assemblage grew out of sedimented processes, and was thus mobilized in contradictory ways in the two states. Here is an example of what I mean by contingency: Articulations of Hindu fundamentalism in the pro-dam and anti-dam conflicts were inextricably connected to and dependent on existing socio-political, historical, and economic contexts of each state.

In the next section, however, I showcase that these divergent Hindutva representations enacted the same Hinduizing dynamics within the dam debates: compounding religious divides, inflaming anxieties around national integrity, and consolidating Hindu supremacy. Such patterns materialized through expressions of threat and security, pride and unity in the pro-dam and anti-dam protests. In the theoretical interlude, I demonstrate that hydroelectric landscapes are amenable to conflicting readings of space. I argue that this mutability allowed for Hindutva rhetoric to infiltrate both pro-dam and anti-dam movements, and render invisible place attachments that exist outside the dominant Hindu imaginary. Because dams and rivers operate as sources of power, they can be wielded to exact political and social discipline. I put forth that it is precisely because right-wing Hindu forces took on region-specific forms that they gained purchase at the local level, and were able to infiltrate dam building debates, ultimately transforming hydroelectric landscapes into exclusionary sites of control.

When we examine the green-saffron relationship using the regional modernities lens, we uncover the opposing modes through which Hindu nationalism intersects with nature. In this chapter, I show that Hindutva proponents engage with nature as an entity to be preserved for national heritage or rendered productive for national growth—both processes cement Hindu dominance, perpetuating the Hindu Right’s broader efforts to assert the reality of a proto-Hindu nation.

In Chapter Four, I unpack how environmentalists opposed to religious nationalism understand the bottom-up and top-down spatial dimensions of the green-saffron nexus, and how they attempt to navigate as well as resist both. I begin by stating that environmental movements are a category of contentious politics. They are characterized by claim-making, contentious performances, and conflictive negotiations. In this chapter, I focus on how three interlocutors—Aaron, Kumar, and Priya—grapple with whether and how to engage with the environmental claims of the Hindu Right.

In the first section, I analyze Aaron’s opposition to cooperation with right-wing Hindu actors. I argue that interpretations of good politics, mediated by environmental justice framings and individual moral codes, prevent Aaron from imagining the possibility of green-saffron alliances. In his opinion, Hindu nationalism is the antithesis of core environmental justice commitments. Collaboration with right-leaning actors would thus generate insurmountable moral inconsistencies.

In contrast, Kumar took on a more ambivalent position. He, like Aaron, is fundamentally averse to saffronizing politics. However, Kumar demonstrated more uncertainty about coalition building with individuals who champion progressive green causes but also take on Hinduizing positions.
This hesitancy arose from moving between macro and micro scales, comprehending overarching Hindu nationalist ideology and the views of individual Hindu Right actors, and attempting to compartmentalize the two. It emerged also from his efforts to treat his ideological opponents as complex, contradictory actors. In doing so, shared interests come to light, opening up the possibility of mutual engagement towards joint environmental action. Yet I underline that this perspective-taking does not guarantee cooperative activity. As Kumar alternates between an individual’s exclusionary ideology, their humanity, and common environmental concerns, he shifts in his decision-making regarding green-saffron alliances, sometimes moving towards and other times distancing from such coalition bonds.

This contingency is further highlighted in the chapter’s final section, in which I explore Priya’s responses to forging ties with right-wing Hindu actors. Her deliberations incorporated the pragmatic needs and demands of environmental movements. Using the collaborative adversarial relationship lens, I explore opportunity and threat factors that prompt ideologically opposed organizations to temporarily overcome differences in order to achieve common environmental goals. Moreover, I describe the creative tactics used to sustain these relations in the face of reputational risks, moral discomfort, and ideological conflict. I discuss how Priya’s maneuvering around green-saffron alliances is driven by weighing external circumstances, right/wrong judgments, and the perceived effectiveness of coalition ties. Such cost-benefit assessments are sticky and uneasy, shifting in nature, and subject to varying interpretations.

From this analysis, it becomes clear that collaboration and/or opposition to Hindutva affiliates’ environmental participation can be rendered uncertain when engaging with scales and contingency. These frameworks reveal the heterogeneity of the green-saffron relationship, as well as multiple points where it should be resisted. Yet contingency and scale also give rise to competing questions and motivations that environmental activists have to wrestle with. In doing so, they may arrive at conflicting stances on the green-saffron nexus, which may ultimately influence decision-making around coalition ties, environmental action, and both their outcomes. What comes to light is the stuff of contentious environmentalist politics: Shifting positions, episodic interactions, and evolving relations between claimants (e.g., progressive environmentalists), mediators (e.g., individual right-wing Hindu actors), and subjects of claims (e.g., the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party).

In the concluding chapter, I discuss examples of interactions between far-right and environmental thought outside India. I note that these examples and the Indian case study signal to how nature is contingently woven into the norms, practices, and structures of nationalist doctrines, and vice versa. They indicate the divergent channels through which nationalistic and green thinking clash and converge, and, therefore, the multiple junctures at which these entangled webs must be disabled. Contingency and scale, in this way, push us to expand our understanding of who mobilizes nature and to what ends. These frameworks force us to confront the injustices certain commitments to nature may give rise to between and across spatial scales. Crucially, they propel us to reflect more deeply on how our own environmentalism has the potential to be implicated in but also oppose socially destructive forces. With this recognition, we may begin the hard work of breaking down border walls and barriers, and, ultimately, set about reimagining healthier, more humane structures and societies, nations as well as natures.
Chapter (One): Introduction

I bow to thee, Mother,
richly-watered, richly-ruited,
cool with the winds of the south,
dark with the crops of the harvests,
the Mother!

Her nights rejoicing in the glory of the moonlight,
her lands clothed beautifully with her trees in flowering bloom,
sweet of laughter, sweet of speech,
the Mother, giver of boons, giver of bliss!

Aurobindo Ghose, a prominent figure in India’s independence movement, translated this first stanza of India’s national song Vande Mataram in 1909, four years after the poem captured popular imagination as a rallying cry for solidarity in response to the Bengal Partition. Almost three decades later, when Britain withdrew its forces and the subcontinent split into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, Vande Mataram was conferred the status of national song (Ramaswamy, 2020, p. 117-118). The hymn itself, however, has been mired in political controversy. Since Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay first penned the words of Vande Mataram in 1876, the song has transformed from an ode to India’s natural bounty, to a sign of resistance against the colonial state, and a source of communal strife (Pandey, 2006). Among

1 The poem’s later verses anthropomorphize India as a Hindu goddess, generating associative links between national territory and Hindu imagination. For this reason, the poem’s status as a national song has been charged with undercutting the nation’s secular foundations (Lipner, 2010).
2 It is important to note here that Hinduism the religion is separate from Hindutva the political ideology. According to Vinayak Sarvarkar, the ‘Father of Hindutva,’ Hinduness constitutes a cultural or ethnic feeling; it encompasses all
the many readings and misreadings of Vande Mataram also emerge questions about the relationship between nature and nation, as signaled in the critical opening stanza. Replete with nature symbolism, the hymn lends geographic expression to the nation-state. From the winds of the south to the crops of the harvests and the trees in flowering bloom, the poem eulogizes India’s natural landscapes. It fosters affect-laden attachments to the homeland, almost as if to cartographically suture back India’s fractured geo-political body.

National histories everywhere abound with examples of infusing nature with national imagination. As Anthony Smith posits, “the creation of nations requires a special place for the nation to inhabit, a land ‘of their own.’ Not any land; a historic land, a homeland, an ancestral land” (Smith, 1986, p. 64, as cited in Schwartz, 2007). He goes on to observe that nation-building necessitates “collective perceptions, encoded in myths and symbols, of the ethnic ‘meanings’ of particular stretches of territory” so as to offer “‘maps’ of the community, its history, its destiny, and its place among the nations” (Smith, 1991, p. 64, as cited in Schwartz, 2007).

This thesis contributes to such literature that examines the pivotal role nature plays in making and unmaking conceptions of nationhood. My empirical focus is on the Indian context, in which I investigate entwined strands of Hindu nationalist and green thinking, or what Mukul Sharma (2011) terms the green-saffron nexus, whereby the saffron color connotes efforts to Hinduize India’s political, social, and cultural apparati. I expand on and complicate Sharma’s analysis by attending to three facets of Indian environmental politics: cow protection, dam construction, and coalition building between Hindutva affiliates and left-orientated environmentalists. Drawing on these case studies, my thesis addresses the following questions: How and to what extent do Hindu nationalism and Indian environmental politics intersect? What
is at stake when nature protection and Hindutva discourses are interwoven? And how do progressive environmental activists grapple with convergences and divergences between right-wing Hindu and environmental movements?

In addressing these questions, I aim to expand the green-saffron nexus by illuminating its “multi-scalar” (Pain & Staeheli, 2014) dimensions and their political effects. My analysis of cow protection and dam building reveals two types of scale: intimate and spectacular as well as regional and national. Through grounding (Pain & Smith, 2010) my research in micro (intimate and regional) and macro (spectacular and national) scales, I show that intersections between green and saffron are neither predetermined nor inevitable; rather, they take on contingent and shifting forms. I highlight, however, the contiguity between these distinct pathways. Using a feminist geopolitical lens, I demonstrate how even disparate materialities of the green-saffron relationship enable the consolidation of a Hindu state. I contend that if activists hope to counter the green-saffron nexus, they must recognize the workings of Hindutva at different scales and spaces of Indian environmental politics.

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wrestling with the unwieldy connections between Hindu Right and environmental movements, and are doing so in creative, pragmatic, and empathic ways.

This chapter is organized as follows. I will first provide a brief overview of Hindu nationalism and its principle ideological tenets. In this section, I will introduce key terminology I use throughout the thesis. Next, I will situate the green-saffron relationship within broader linkages between nature and nation in India. Then, I will detail the research methodology of this study. In the last section, I will explicate the central theoretical frameworks that organize my examination of dam building and the contemporary cow protection movements. Here, I will also outline the structure of the main thesis body chapters, which will set the stage for investigating examples of the green-saffron nexus in the remainder of the thesis.

**Context and Definitions**

*Hindu Nationalism*

In the past three decades, India has witnessed an upswing in Hindu nationalism or Hindutva (“Hindu-ness”), a majoritarian, primordial form of nationalism (Anand, 2011, p. 2). Hindutva’s core impulse is to transform India into a Hindu rashtra (nation). Its *modus operandi* is firmly implanting the ascendancy of Hindu identity in Indian civilization and demanding religious minorities assimilate into Hindu *samaj* (society) and *sanskriti* (culture). Because the holyland for non-Hindu² groups lie outside India, Hindutva adherents view religious minorities’ loyalty to the nation as deeply suspect. The primary target of this suspicion is the Muslim population; this is in part because Muslims constitute the country’s largest minority and in part

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² It is important to note here that Hinduism the religion is separate from Hindutva the political ideology. According to Vinayak Sarvarkar, the ‘Father of Hindutva,’ Hinduness constitutes a cultural or ethnic feeling; it encompasses all religions that originate in India: Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. In this manner, Hindutva as a political formulation conflates religion with ethnicity and religious belief with national identification (Varshney, 2021).
due to the bloodied memory of the 1947 Partition, which left an indelible traumatic mark on Hindu-Muslim ties (Varshney, 1993).

Hindutva, however, was conceived well before Partition and independence. Hindu nationalism in its most nascent form took root in the 19th century, and later evolved into a concrete ideology alongside secular nationalism, which prevailed as the organizing apparatus of India’s nation-building project following independence. Yet it was only in the 1990s that Hindu nationalism entered into popular consciousness, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) began its ascent in mainstream politics (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 3). Organizationally, the BJP functions as the Hindu Right’s political wing, but the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the ideological mothership of the Sangh Parivar (family), an umbrella term encompassing India’s collection of right-wing Hindu organizations (Anand, 2011, p. 2). In this thesis, I will use the terms Hindu Right, saffron and Hindutva brigade, right-wing Hindu nationalists, Sangh Parivar, and Sangh interchangeably. I interrogate Hindu nationalism as an ideology, as a movement, and as actors that constitute the movement or lend it some degree of support.

One of the fundamental challenges to Hindu nationalism is lending geographic coherence to a unified Hindu nation. For most of India’s history, political unity did not map on to geographic unity, hence the relationship between the two was and has to be continuously renegotiated and reinscribed (Jalal, 1995, p. 10). This is not to say that the Indian subcontinent did not constitute a territorial entity. Ayesha Jalal (1995) argues that pre-colonial India preserved a semblance of geographic unity due to the fluidity of geographic and political frontiers, a departure from the inflexible ethno-religious boundaries put forth by the Hindu nationalist movement, which neither conform to the multiple nationalisms in India, nor their dispersal across the country’s territorial expanse (Mishra, 2014).
Central also to India’s geographic lexicon is the notion of sacred geography, a network of holy places vested with mythological and emotional meaning. As Diane Eck (2011) describes, India’s “unity as a nation…has been firmly constituted by the sacred geography it has held in common and revered: its mountains, forests, rivers, hilltop shrines” (Dalrymple, 2012). Threats to this sacred geography generate profound political anxieties (Varshney, 1993). These fears coupled with the inability to actualize a geographically defined Hindu rashtra propel the Hindu Right’s violent obsessions with occupying symbolic and physical spaces within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state (Oza, 2007, p. 167). In the process of collapsing political and geographic unity, forcefully legitimizing linkages between the two, we come to see how nature is continually imbricated in interwoven formulations of sacred geography, territorial integrity, and a Hindu nationalist identity.

*Nature*

Before unpacking the role of nature in assembling a Hindutva consciousness, I will define here how I use nature in my thesis. My analysis of the relationship between Hindu nationalism and nature stems from the premise that nature is not just a material entity “out there” but a socially constructed idea bound up in cultural norms, power dynamics, claims, and counter-claims (Cronon, 1996, p. 21). John Hultgren (2015) discusses how nature and culture have in the past been treated as disconnected ontological domains. The false dichotomy between “(emancipatory) nature and (exclusionary) culture,” he contends, is one environmental restrictionists can easily exploit precisely because it obscures the ways in which exclusionary social logic becomes wedged into environmental discourse, or how specific commitments to nature themselves enable synergies between exclusionary social agendas and green thinking. My thesis is primarily concerned with this understanding of nature: as a “contingent effect of power”
In this research, I interrogate how power plays out in contexts where nature is viewed as a symbol (e.g., the holy cow), as the environment, both built and natural (e.g., dam building landscapes), and as preoccupations with what is deemed natural (e.g., an organic nation) and unnatural. I examine how such ‘natures’ are imagined, constructed, and contested within the boundaries of the nation-state, specifically within the contours of a Hindu nation-state. The following section will explore in further detail overarching trends in how nature emerges as a potent ideological category for national aspirations in India.

**Nation and Nature**

Deploying nature to articulate visions of nationhood is not a recent phenomenon in the country. At various points in Indian history, actors have established allegiance to the landscape as a means to claim a right over place. Based on the assumption that nature is a timeless reality (Hultgren, 2015, p. 7), different collectivities trace their origins in nature, or ‘the beginning of creation,’ in order to assert the indisputability of their political representation and position of power (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, p. 3). Fauna iconography, endemic species, and charismatic animals are instrumental in this process of forging temporal continuity, of conceptualizing a place’s myth of origin (Malkki, 1997, p. 52-75). Nature, in other words, is key to narrativizing the nation (Chattarjee, 2005).

When considering time, it should be underlined that nationalism in India is inflected by “a sense of lag and a historical consciousness of lack” (Gupta, 2007, p. 275). In this context, control of nature--through preserving, managing, or destroying it--serves as a gauge of crisis and progress, decline and advancement in post-colonial India (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, p. 7). The entangled strands of place, time, nature, and nation are captured by the term ecological nationalism. Gunnel Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2005) theorize ecological nationalism as
the process wherein “cosmopolitan and nativist versions of nature devotion converge and express themselves as a form of nation-pride in order to become part of processes of legitimizing and consolidating the nation.”

Ecological nationalism is exemplified by India’s national animal, the tiger. During the independence movement, Subhas Chandra Bose, a venerated champion of the freedom struggle, instituted the Springing Tiger as the Indian National Army’s symbol, an emblem to oppose the British Empire’s Lion of Britannia. Drawing on the tiger’s associations with divinity and power in South Indian folklore, the tiger came to represent unity, strength, and freedom in the resistance period (Rangarajan, 2020). Later, in 1972, in the post-independence era, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched the Wildlife Protection Act and, subsequently, Project Tiger, which aimed to protect the Bengal Tiger from extinction and preserve its natural habitats (Rangarajan, 2015, p. 235). In a letter urging Parliament to support the Wildlife Protection Act, Gandhi stated: “It concerns the survival of our famous natural heritage. It is hard to think of an India devoid of its magnificent animals, of the hard-pressed tiger, for instance, going the way of the now extinct Indian Cheetah” (Thapar, 2003, p. 250, as cited in Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). Gandhi’s ecological patriotism instantiates a national boundedness and belonging mediated by the relationship between humans and other life forms. The nationalization of nature and the naturalization of the nation highlighted here stress the moral panics associated with uprootedness: The loss of the Bengal Tiger would have been an erosion of national history, identity, and, above all, unity. The ideal of rootedness is captured by Kirkpatrick Sale (1990): “Ultimately love is the true cradle of politics…the love of the particular bioregion we inhabit…the love of that unnameable essence that binds us together with the earth, and provides the water for the roots we sink” (Malkki, 1997, p. 30).
Rootedness, love for certain natures, and the desire for inner coherence within the national community will be recurring themes in this thesis. Because a core objective of Hindutva is to unify the Hindu body politic, particular forms of nature devotion often serve to mobilize citizens around a Hindu nation. Such ethicopolitical commitments to environmental protection can give way to violent spectacles of Hindu supremacy, as will be illuminated in the second chapter on the cow protection movement. Ecological nationalism, in this way, is expressed through inclusionary as well as exclusionary modalities.

That janus-faced nature is seen again by the tiger symbol. During the anti-colonial nationalism of the independence period, the Springing Tiger epitomized an inclusive model of nation-building; it represented unity among different castes, creeds, and religions in the face of resistance against British imperialism (Rangarajan, 2020). Project Tiger, on the other hand, while driven by the tiger’s status as India’s national animal and heritage, displaced nearly 18,493 families, predominantly within Adivasi (indigenous) communities, across 215 villages in order to create ‘people free’ tiger reserves (Kukreti, 2020). The preservation of ‘nationalized natures,’ in this case, was built on removal, silencing, and coercion. In deploying faunal imagery to construct ideas of nationhood, which necessitate constant renewal and revitalization, some attachments to nature and the nation gain precedence over others. Such hierarchical practices lay at the center of the green-saffron nexus. It is in this manner that certain commitments to nature become “new political performatives” (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, p. 7) of Hindu dominance.

John Hultgren (2015) posits that nature gets nested within territorial concepts of nationhood for exclusionary ends during moments of real or perceived crisis. Project Tiger, for example, emerged out of not only fast dwindling Bengal Tiger populations but also a conservation agenda fueled by heightened nationalist sentiment, a reaction to the series of
cascading crises that hit India in the early 1970s: An influx of migrants after the 1971 India-Pakistan war; drought in 1971 and 1972; the oil-price shock following the 1973 Arab-Israel war; and skyrocketing consumer good prices for two consecutive years. In 1975, Indira Gandhi declared a highly controversial State of Emergency, effectively suspending civil liberties and conferring an unprecedented level of decision-making ability on to the central government. With this concentration of power, a 1997 Constitutional Amendment shifted the protection of ‘Forests and Wildlife’ further under the jurisdiction of the federal government, giving way to a top-down conservation regime that has since failed to account for the needs and demands of people on the ground (Rangarajan, 2015, p. 170).

Exaggerating and manufacturing feelings of crisis similarly forms an essential tactic of the Hindutva repertoire. Maintaining alarm around threats to Hindu unity and purity is necessary to authenticate the Hindu Right corpus because its political foundation rests on the myth of Hinduism being the primordial essence of India (Chakrabartty, 2020). When environmental crises are considered in this light, concerns over the environmental degradation of sites of national significance intersect powerfully with concerns related to the decay of the organic (that is, “natural”) nation. The rhetoric of ecological crisis is thus abstracted from the environmental domain and redeployed in the political to sustain and advance the Hindu nationalist agenda. The mechanisms and implications of this process, specifically in relation to cow protection and dam building, will be the focus of this thesis.

Yet Hindutva forces function in ways that do not always support but rather actively impede efforts to sustainably manage the nation’s environments. Taming nature through socially and environmentally devastating methods has also been justified in national terms. After independence, for example, big dams, steel plants, land-use change, and fertilizer factories
transformed into bastions of economic development, a trajectory modeled after growth in the
Global North. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, famously extolled dams as
“temples of modern India” (Baviskar, 2019). These monuments of industrial prowess exerted
national strength. In India’s time of nationalism, which bears the imprint of a “historical
consciousness of lack,” accelerated progress signaled towards exhilarating new beginnings. The
need to modernize was felt even more acutely with temporal lag—the awareness that India and
the rest of the developing world had two or three decades to attain the same prosperity that
developed nations took more than a century to achieve (Gupta, 2007, p. 275). Visions of a bright,
new future were additionally brought into sharp relief against the backdrop of a nation still
reeling from Partition and its colonial past (Rangarajan, 2015, p. 198). As such, a thwarted
historical destiny amplified the seduction of newness, and the two together have powered the
turbocharged development course pursued in post-independence India. Such rapid growth has
necessarily pivoted on extractive and capital-intensive industrialization, e.g., mega projects, land
clearance for agricultural expansion, and big dams (Rangarajan, 2015, p. 209). This newness of
nation, dependent also on transforming nature anew, is the “utopian promise of nationalism”
(Gupta, 2007, p. 271).

The conflict between conserving and depleting nature, when both are filtered through a
national imagination, will be underlined in the third chapter. Here, I will compare the assemblage
of Hindu nationalist formulations in pro-dam and anti-dam movements that transpired in the
states of Gujarat and Uttarakhand respectively. The contrasting expressions of Hindutva in these
case studies shed light on the regional, historical, and contextual path dependencies of green-
saffron relations. This historical and political contingency becomes apparent when we employ a
scalar framework that cuts across multiple social geographies, revealing continuities as well as disjunctures between disparate formations of Hindutva-based ecological nationalism.

Granularity, scale, and contingency are important analytical frames in this thesis. Thus far, I have underlined broad currents in Indian environmental history through which linkages between nation and nature play out: national pride and heritage, boundaries and belonging, inclusion and exclusion, and crisis and progress. By adopting a multi-dimensional perspective, I demonstrate how such assumptions are hedged within the green-saffron nexus but are juxtaposed and more variegated across different scales and geographical contexts. With scale jumping, it becomes possible to see how even seemingly benign types of nature protection, for instance, an ethic of animal care, as will be explored in the second chapter, or a place-based preservationist impulse, as will portrayed in the third chapter, buttress the Hindu Right’s political project. When environmentalists attend to the multiple “enunciative sites” (Hultgren, 2015, p. 22) where constructs of nature and Hindu hegemony fuse, they recognize how environmental commitments they themselves hold can be deployed for exclusionary purposes. With this understanding, they may be better positioned to dismantle and more fully resist Hinduizing forces that weaponize nature—either as resource or national heritage—in the service of a Hindu nation-state.

In the last chapter, I showcase that environmental advocates are indeed reckoning with intersections between green and saffron. But I demonstrate that opposition to such interactions becomes rife with tension when environmentalists oscillate between macro (e.g., political discourse and movements) and micro (e.g., interpersonal relationships and individual ethics) spaces where environmental and Hindu nationalist declarations unfold. Although an analytical focus on scale and contingency may be useful for developing a comprehensive picture of ecological nationalism under a Hindu Right regime, it may nevertheless be strategically
debilitating. As I show, my progressive environmentalist interlocutors confront a number of
dilemmas as they weigh whether to engage in practical green-saffron alliances, ranging from
their own sense of morality, their perception of the (Hindu Right) Other’s humanity, an
environmental justice ethos, and their own movement’s needs and effectiveness. How they
process, make determinations, and generate meaning out of these conflicting motivations—even
as they never fully overcome them—will be the focus of the fourth chapter.

Methodology

To answer my driving research questions, I draw on both primary and secondary
sources as well as original interview data. My thesis frameworks are grounded in political
ecology, feminist theory, anthropology, and sociology. Within these disciplines, I focus on
studies that unpack linkages between nature and culture, sovereignty and exclusionary
environmental thought, and nationalistic ideology and environmentalism in contexts within and
outside India. Further, I analyze scholarly work on Hindu nationalism, and in particular, the
socio-political, historical, and economic conditions that enabled its ascent. This secondary
research is supplemented by discourse analysis of primary sources, including election
manifestos, political pamphlets, and newspapers, as well as twenty semi-structured interviews
with environmental activists, government functionaries, environmental scholars, and animal
advocates in India. The interviews aimed to obtain participants’ views on the Hindu Right’s
environmental engagement, the evolving landscape of environmentalism and environmental
challenges in India, and how nature figures in ideas about national identity.

Thesis Frameworks and Roadmap

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3 Unless specified, I refer to my interlocutors using pseudonyms throughout this paper.
The organization of this thesis is as follows. The second and third chapters examine India’s contemporary cow protection and dam building movements respectively. I have chosen to investigate these two case studies because they reveal two distinct dimensions of the green-saffron nexus: the intimate and spectacular as well as regional and national. I employ the intimate-spectacular framework to explore how cow protectionism manifests at individual and national levels, in private and public realms. The co-determined relationship between the two is elucidated by Rachel Pain and Susan Smith’s (2008) concept of the double helix, a motif that represents the interconnected strands of the geopolitical and the everyday. I use the double helix model to articulate: the heterogeneity of the cow protection movement across intimate and spectacular scales; the shadowy and more brutal modes through which Hindutva operates within bovine politics; and the mutually strengthening ties between love and violence in the context of cow protectionism.

In the next chapter, I illuminate the geographic scale of the green-saffron nexus—the regional dimensions of this relationship. I compare Hinduizing discourses in relation to support for a dam project in Gujarat and opposition to another in Uttarakhand. Here, I employ the regional modernities analytic conceptualized by K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal (2003) to explain paradoxical assertions of Hindu nationalist ideology in the two dam building case studies. The regional modernities lens puts forth that modern phenomena, including ideologies such as Hindu nationalism, hinge on historical, social, and material realities that circulate within specific contexts. Yet even these situated nationalist formations, and the opposing ways in which they intersect with nature, are connected across space and time. I contend that it is precisely this simultaneous specificity and durability that caused hydroelectric landscapes to mutate into coercive geographies in Gujarat’s pro-dam and Uttarakhand’s anti-dam movements, crystallizing
spatialities of Hindu Right power even as they emerged in divergent patterns within the two states.

In chapter four, I examine how progressive environmentalists perceive the ways in which green and saffron merge and collide. I unpack how the activists’ perceptions influence engagements with Hindu Right actors who share environmental concerns similar to their own. I demonstrate that my interlocutors themselves practice scale jumping, moving from everyday to geopolitical representations of Hindutva and nature. I end by discussing how such “spaces of engagement” (Jonas, 2006) where politics and resistance are enacted affect the participants’ decision-making regarding coalition building with right-leaning actors, and I further emphasize the shifting, contingent nature of these calculations. In the concluding chapter, I summarize my chapter findings, revisit the implications of contingency and scale, and highlight the centrality of nature in right-wing nationalist projects that include but are not limited to Hindu nationalism.
Chapter (Two): Intimate and Spectacular Modes of the Cow Protection Movement

Introduction

During an animal fair in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that for "some people, the moment the words Om⁴ and gai (cow) fall on their ears, their hair stands on end. They think the country has gone [back] to the 16th and 17th centuries.” He went on to contend that livestock, and the cow in particular, are linchpins of a robust rural economy. Modi’s comments were posted online alongside an image of a cow. In the photo, Modi is seen feeding and petting a brown, doe-eyed bovine whose neck and back are decorated with ceremonious cloth and strings of marigold flowers.⁵ Behind the Prime Minister stands Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh and a firebrand Hindutva leader. Draped in orange robes and arms crossed in a sign of respect, Adityanath gazes admiringly at the display of human-animal intimacy before him (Rashid, 2019). The tortured politics of beef-eating are writ large in the optics of the photo op: in its distinctly saffron hues; in Modi’s ostensible concern for the benign beast; and in the performative animal affection—a trademark of the BJP’s media appearances.

As a sacred animal in Hinduism, a large portion of India’s Hindu population refrains from killing cows. Cattle acquire elevated status among Hindus in part because of the nutritional and material quality of milk, specifically its “life-enhancing properties…pure white color…sweet flavor and rich mouth-feel” (Staples, 2020 p. 36). Milk and cows also serve as central features in Hindu ritual practices. Early Vedic literature (ca. 1500 BCE) highlights the cow’s symbolic significance in restoring cosmic balance (rha) in the universe as well as its

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⁴ A Hindu symbol that signals an “ultimate reality.”
⁵ Floral garlands are frequently utilized in Hindu rituals to symbolize respect, love, and auspiciousness.
economic value in *yajna* (sacrifice) ceremonies. The cow thus features as a prominent type of “nature” in Hindu history and mythology. Although the bovine was a prominent motif in the Vedic period, its associations with divinity solidified when the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence) started gaining traction among Brahmanical (upper-caste Hindu) circles following the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism in India in the 5th Century BCE. Later, Mahatma Ghandi’s deployment of the cow metaphor as a “poem of piety” in the independence movement officially installed bovine animals as objects of veneration (Korom, 2000). Other religious groups, however, and a number of Hindus, do consume beef; it is a delicacy in some regions and a staple food in others. Beef is also comparatively cheaper to other meat in India, and hence is the main source of protein for low-income groups, predominantly made up of Muslims, Dalits (lower-caste Hindu communities, formerly known as ‘untouchables’) and Adivasis (Indigenous groups). Further, occupations in the leather, cattle transportation and trading, and beef production industries are primarily held by Muslims and Dalits. Proposed cow slaughter policies that envision a blanket ban on the transportation, slaughter, and consumption of cows, bulls, and bullocks hence not only seek to alter the country’s existing foodscapes, they threaten the livelihoods and security of already marginalized populations (Alam, 2017).

The cow protection movement also takes on a violent face. Since the BJP’s ascent to power in 2014, there has been an upsurge of cow vigilantism spearheaded by gau rakshaks (cow vigilante groups), many of which posture as militant Hindu organizations. Human Rights Watch reported that between May 2015 and December 2018, gau rakshaks lynched 44 individuals, of which 36 were Muslim, on the charge of cow slaughter. While the BJP has officially denounced

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6 Most Indian states have enacted some form of legislation against cow slaughter. However, these laws are neither uniform nor standardized across the country. Hence, cow protection societies have long agitated for a national ban on cow slaughter. There is still no consensus on the legitimacy of such bans, and the constitutionality of anti-slaughter legislation continues to be debated in courts.
cow vigilantism, it has been slow to do so and has not ensured legal action against gau rakshaks (Barry, 2016). Anti-beef hysteria stoked by the BJP has in fact emboldened cow vigilante outfits, with some senior leaders going so far as to embrace cow vigilantes as “patriots” (The Times of India, 2018). Others, while decrying violence, have attempted to introduce more stringent state laws against cow slaughter, including a Cow Protection Bill that seeks to impose the death penalty on actors that partake or facilitate the killing of cows (Scroll, 2017). This polarizing climate brings the underlying Hindu majoritarian sentiments of cow protection into sharp relief.

Extant literature has underlined the communal nature of cow protection by paying close attention to the horrific hate crimes, brutal violence, and charged rhetoric surrounding the cow and its progeny. This chapter, however, aims to illuminate positions outside these explicitly partisan spheres. My interlocutors were quick to condemn the violent strands of cow protectionism, adopting instead stances of deep care towards bovine creatures. Their positions on the cow—both as a sentient being and material entity—were centrally located in the relational context between animal and human. Concerned with animal welfare more broadly and cow protection specifically, the activists I interviewed invested the holy cow idiom with emotional, cosmological, and moral meanings. The significance of bovine animals for the participants I spoke to necessarily grew out of lived experiences, quotidian interactions, and embodied realities. These ‘intimate’ spaces are somewhat differentiated from the ‘spectacular’ spaces of the cow protection movement, which are typified by political theatre, cow-related violence, and attendant media frenzy and public outrage.

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7 It bears mentioning that cow protection featured more prominently in the BJP’s 1998 election manifesto than in its 2014 and 2019 manifestos, perhaps because the party has sought to appeal to a broader electoral base by emphasizing economic development over the more inflammatory elements of the Hindu Right, such as a national ban against cow slaughter.

8 In South Asia, the terms communal and communalism refer to conflict between religious communities.
Yet the intimate and spectacular dimensions of cow protection are not diametrically opposed; rather, I propose that they intertwine in distinct ways. My interlocutors and Hindu nationalists employ overlapping registers in articulating a defense of cow protection at the levels of both personal commitment and national politics; these include arguments that touch on the economy, environment, animal materiality, divinity, and national identity. Moreover, the subjects in this study, alongside more contentious actors within the cow protection movement, share the goal of installing a national ban on cow slaughter. As a result, the interviewees are inevitably and unwittingly implicated in the displacement of marginalized groups who rely on bovine meat for daily income and sustenance. Unlike the shocking mob lynchings, this method of dispossession is slow, unspectacular, and gradual. The participants’ perspectives are neither motivated by party politics nor inclined towards hate and violence but are nonetheless complicit in entrenching a social order where other diets, other religious beliefs, other occupations, and other bodies (both animal and human) are consigned to the margins of environmental thought.

Through the intimate-spectacular framework, I will illustrate the multiscalar nature (Pain & Staeheli, 2014) of cow protection, demonstrating how it cuts across individual/private and national/public realms. My argument is first that positions embodying the intimate and spectacular shades of cow protection are discrete categories: The former primarily stems from an ethic of care and non-violence and the latter from a schismatic, at times violent, set of nationalistic ideas. When demands for a national beef ban are refracted through the lens of Hindutva, it becomes possible to see how Hindu fundamentalism itself is enunciated at individual and national levels and intimate and spectacular spaces respectively. Yet even intimate manifestations of cow protectionism shape and are shaped by circuits of higher bovine politics. Here, the Hindutva calculus finds expression in forms ranging from overtly antagonistic
in the spectacular domain to the “normalized quiet of unseen power” (Nixon, 2011, p. 6) in the intimate. These modalities of power reveal how even generative forces such as animal love and care come to buoy the destructive potential of Hindu hegemony. This pattern demonstrates how spectacular and intimate domains of cow protectionism exist as a “double helix,” (Pain & Smith, 2008, as cited in Dowler, Christian, and Ranjbar, 2014), wherein the two spheres are separate but interconnected, operating concurrently and in mutually constitutive ways.

To support my argument, I will begin by providing a brief history of the cow protection movement. In this section, I will underline Hindu nationalist narratives that framed the movement in the late 19th century, and how these framings extend to present day discourse around human-bovine relations. Here, I will focus specifically on the spectacular registers of cow protection, highlighting how the Hindu Right’s engagement with the movement is situated in the tension between bovine beasts as semiotic devices and living beings with material value. I will then analyze the interviews I conducted with cow protection proponents, and trace the more intimate linkages between cow and human. In this section, I will demonstrate how the material and symbolic elements of bovine animals intersect rather than come into conflict. Next, I will attend to the terminology of non-violence and moral disgust, revealing how the former gives rise to the latter. In doing so, I will shed light on degrees of violence between individual and national spheres of the cow protection movement. In the next section, I will explore how imaginings of ‘Hindu’ national identity serve as openings in the intimate-spectacular double helix. To end, I will examine how authenticity and dignity, two key components of identity constructions, traverse the private and public domains of cow protection, displaying the ‘spill over’ of overarching Hindutva rhetoric into everyday life and vice versa.

Past and Present Forms of Bovine Nationalism
The holy cow has been a source of communal conflagrations since the late 19th century. Gundimeda & Ashwin (2018) chart this history starting with the activism of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj,\(^9\) in the present day states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. In this first organized cow protection movement, Saraswati and his supporters deployed the cow as a “bridging symbol” to unite disparate castes and sects of Hinduism (O’ Toole, 2003, as cited in Gundimeda & Ashwin, 2018). They did so by conjuring a mythical, golden past during which cow slaughter was purportedly absent in India. According to this argument, “flesh-eating foreigners [Muslim invaders and the British Empire]” sanctioned cow slaughter when they came to power, and in doing so, caused the “miseries of the Aryans”\(^10\) to intensify (Saraswati, 1875, as cited in Gundimeda & Ashwin, 2018). Here, the belief that a Hindu identity had become downtrodden after centuries of foreign rule animates cow protection discourse. This sentiment is echoed in the Hindu Right’s declensionist narratives today as well. BJP slogans such as “bachegi gay, bachega desh” (save the cow, save the country) lend legitimacy to a kind of fear psychosis about the nation being threatened from within and without. In this way, the “semiotically thick symbol” (Govindrajan, 2018, p. 2) of the cow comes to embody ideas of a Hindu rashtra (nation). Based on this metonymic projection, those that produce and consume beef (Muslims, Christians, and lower-caste Hindus) threaten a (upper-caste) Hindu identity and by extension India’s national identity. It then becomes necessary to expunge such threats to the nation.

Cow protection riots in the 1890s magnified the hysteria surrounding the security of the Indian polity (Menon, 2010). A major flashpoint in religious conflict in this decade, violent

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\(^9\) A reformist sect of modern Hinduism.

\(^10\) Hindu nationalists claim that Aryans are indigenous to India, but it is more likely the case that they were nomadic tribes who migrated from Central Asia to South Asia. This transition marked the beginning of the Vedic period in India (Pillalamarri, 2019).
clashes broke out between Hindus and Muslims across the country in part due to Eid al-Adha celebrations, an annual festival in Islam marked by the sacrifice of goats, sheep, cows or camel. In the 70s and 80s, there was increased circulation of cow protection propaganda in Hindi newspapers. Many of these writings propounded derogatory ideas of the barbaric meat-eating Muslim (Patel, 2008). Muslims in turn viewed the inviolability of the cow as reflective of burgeoning Hindu militancy (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2016). It was in this period that communalizing narratives subsumed bovine bodies. The discursive framework of cow protection continues to erect boundaries between Hindus and Muslims, cementing the creation of two fundamentally different and inimical identities. Viewed in this context, the political impulse behind the cow protection movement is two-fold: to consolidate the Hindu polity and to do so by galvanizing Hindus against an imagined Muslim ‘other’.

Such identity constructions treat nationhood as elemental, natural, and essential. They align with framings of national identity that emanate out of Hindu nationalism. In his treatise on Hindutva, Vinayak Sarvarkar (1923) proclaimed that “Mohamedans (Muslims) are no race…they are a religious unit, yet neither a racial nor a national one. But we Hindus, if possible, are all three put together and live under our ancient and common roof.” Drawing on themes of blood and soil, Sarvarkar suggests that Hindus are naturally rooted in the national body, unlike Muslims who are not even a “race.”

Comaroff & Comaroff (2001) examine similar ideas of rootedness in South Africa with regards to public paranoia around invasive alien vegetation and the threat it poses to fynbos, a sclerophyllous shrubland unique to the Cape Floral Region. Their analysis sheds light on how notions of autochthon-alien were made manifest in media portrayals of the endangered fynbos. The authors posit that nature functions as a “fertile allegory” for expressing postcolonial
anxieties. Ideas of nature after all are constructed by social processes, and therefore reflect the tensions that inhere within social realities (Cronon, 1995, p. 23-69). Part of Comaroff & Comaroff’s argument is that the explosion of identity politics in South Africa’s postcolonial society generates powerful obsessions with national belonging. In the context of the fynbos, the autochthon-alien dichotomy forges demarcations between groups included and excluded from the nation-state. When preoccupations with citizenship are translocated into the natural world, they depoliticize what are essentially socio-political concepts, rendering them into natural, organic, and ultimately indisputable facets of the nation.

Like the fynbos, the cow symbol emerges out of contested identity politics. Although a detailed analysis of India’s postcolonial condition is beyond the scope of this chapter, two key points are worth mentioning. First, unlike in the South African context where globalization and neoliberalism triggered a crisis around belonging, identity politics in India is largely driven by internal factors. As per Pingle and Varshney’s (2006) analysis, Indian identity politics flows from two distinctly modern impulses: the demand for authenticity and the pursuit of dignity. These two driving forces are vocalized through group identity and ideas of tradition. Saraswati’s early cow protection activism was inflected with a similar language of authenticity and dignity, as evidenced through his evocations of mythical history, Hindu ideals, and perceived threats to the Hindu community.

Linked to authenticity and dignity is the quest for recognition in a liberal democracy. India’s adoption of democracy has enabled groups to mobilize around and demand rights and political recognition, which has inadvertently solidified differentiations between identity groups (Dam, 2011). Religion itself was catapulted into electoral politics following a 1909 imperial policy that established separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims (Bajoria, 2009). This policy
has today given way to vote-bank politics\textsuperscript{11} that in turn has bred religious antagonism. Such fissiparous tendencies engender a politics of anxiety over the breakdown of social order (Varshney, 1993). Fostering unity around dominant upper-caste Hindu values is thus seen as the necessary antidote for fractured national integrity. In this manner, cow protection evolves into a potent movement that advances fixations with a nation in crisis and simultaneously alleviates such fears by promoting ideas of a consolidated Hindu \textit{rashtra} (nation). The use of the cow metaphor, in this way, propels the Hindutva juggernaut forward.

Identity politics is not the only framing device of cow protection. Secular arguments also construct the cow protection movement. Economic rationality, particularly as it relates to rural empowerment, is a major theme that arose in early cow protectionism. In the agrarian sector, dairy production provides employment for nearly 70 million households (Ramakumar, 2019) in India. Rural prosperity, for which cattle is an essential part, is thus allied to national prosperity. Hardline Hindus hence present the cow as the fulcrum of India’s economy. This economic reasoning dates back to Saraswati’s activism, during which he peddled arguments of utility to buttress demands for a national beef ban. He put forward the explanation that “the milk of one cow and her six female descendants over the course of their lives would provide sufficient food for a meal each for a total of 154,440 persons, at the rate of 25,740 persons per cow” (Saraswati, 1881, as cited in Gundimeda & Ashwin, 2018). Through this magical thinking, Saraswati aimed to legitimize the beef ban by secularizing cow protectionism. The Hindu Right today similarly employs economic rationality to cloak the socio-political and religious thrust behind proposed anti-slaughter policies.

\textsuperscript{11} Vote-bank politics refers to when political parties make appeals and promises to a certain voting bloc in exchange for political support (Jha, 2019).
Beyond this motivation to conceal and disguise, by engaging with the economic value of bovine animals, cow protection advocates attempt to reconcile the materiality of bovine bodies with the national symbolism attached to the holy cow. As anthropologist Radhika Govindrajan (2018) notes, old and unproductive cows are a burden for cattle herders. The economically viable option is to kill cattle that no longer provide milk. Add to this the fact that bovine meat is produced and consumed more than any other meat in the country, and that India is the second largest exporter of beef12 (Zia, Hansen, and Valdes, 2019) worldwide, and the economic implications of a national beef ban become indisputable (FAO, 2005, as cited in Chigateri, 2010). Inevitably, then, the economic and symbolic values of the sacred cow come into conflict.

To square the two, Hindu nationalists attempt to couple the secular and socio-religious factors underpinning cow protection (Govindrajan, 2018, p. 4). The holy cow metaphor, in this way, is located and negotiated within overarching material realities. While such tactics obscure the driving political forces behind the beef ban, in the analysis of my interlocutors’ responses I will underline how secular framings of cow protection at the individual level do not evade but in fact reify the semiotic import of the cow and vice versa. By oscillating between the secular and religious, cow protection advocates destabilize the material-symbolic binary, revealing the interconnected real and imagined worlds of human-bovine relations they simultaneously inhabit. It is out of this messy, unwieldy past13 and present of bovine politics that positions on cow protection in this project emerge. With the historical background established, the remainder

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12 Buffalo meat constitutes most of the beef export from India. But animal activists, right-wing groups, and religious organizations alike question this claim, stating that cow and buffalo meat are often mixed together and packaged as purely buffalo beef (Winterbottom & Sharma, 2013).

13 I have provided here a brief synopsis of the history of cow protection in India. For a more detailed historical analysis see Patel (2008). For a history of beef eating in ancient India, see the The Myth of the Holy Cow by historian Dwijendra Narayan Jha. In this controversial book, Jha argues that animal sacrifice took place in the Vedic era, and that beef was an integral component of daily diet among Brahmin (upper-caste Hindus) and Buddhist communities. This argument calls into question the Hindu Right’s assertion that Islamic, Christian, and British forces introduced beef consumption in India. It also challenges the notion that cow divinity is an immutable marker
of this chapter will focus on convergences and divergences between the participants’ responses to cow protection and the Hindu Right’s relationship with the sacred cow. To begin, I will interrogate how animal care, as an expression of non-violence, gives impetus to the subjects’ imagination of bovine animals. I argue here that an embodied knowledge of cows informs an ethic of care. I show that unlike the “incommensurate” (Govindrajan, 2018, p. 4) symbolic and real worlds of cow protection that Hindu nationalists attempt to straddle, it is through more intimate relations with actual cows that the material and symbolic, secular and socio-religious elements of cow protection interlock and become mutually reinforcing.

**Care, Animal Materiality, and Secularity**

Despite the deeply violent contours of proposed beef bans, cow protection is also steeped in geographies of compassion. The conceptual device of ahimsa (non-violence), a central philosophy in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (Lodrick, 2005), is of relevance here. Linkages between India’s cattle complex and ahimsa crystallized during the independence movement, when Mahatma Gandhi advocated for the re-organization of animal husbandry around the non-violence principle. It is important to note here that Gandhi staunchly deplored cow-related attacks on Muslims, as well as legislation that imposed dietary requirements on minority groups (Gandhi, 1947, as cited in The Wire, 2018). Indeed, he championed “gau seva (caring for the cow)” as opposed to the more pejorative term “gau raksha (cow protection)” (Avyakta, 2018). My informants, all practicing Hindus, imbibed the philosophy of non-violence through adopting a vegetarian lifestyle and demonstrating an abiding love for animals. All the interviewees either worked in the animal welfare field, had set up gaushalas (cattle shelters), or participated in initiatives to build awareness of the sacred cow and its place in modern India.

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of Hinduism. Jha’s claims, which previous scholarship corroborates, unleashed widespread fury among Hindu fundamentalists, a number of whom sought for the book to be banned across India (Mishra, 2002).
One such animal activist is Malia. Born in the 60s in Delhi, Malia began passionately advocating for animal rights after being inspired by an animal welfare organizer she met in her youth. Soon after, Malia founded an organization dedicated to rehabilitating abandoned pets and street dogs. During this time, she was exposed to the “plight” of Indian cows, noting that they are often left on the street “eating garbage and then eating plastic and…dying a slow death.” These images of death and scenes of apathy trigger a visceral response of horror. It was precisely this reaction that prompted Malia to take up the cause of cow protection. She later established a non-profit with the mission to safeguard cattle and promote Panchagavya or cow derivatives (manure, urine, ghee or clarified butter, and milk), which purportedly have antiseptic properties. Malia stressed that these products are “ayurvedic [a traditional herb-based medicinal system rooted in Hinduism].” By creating a market for Panchagavya, cow protection proponents not only attempt to improve the financial viability of cow shelters, they also seek to develop economic networks predicated on natural and ostensibly humane economic systems, an alternative to the violent excess of the animal industry.

When I asked Malia if she consumes dairy, she answered yes but only from cows housed in her own farm, where she knows they are treated with care. Recently, Malia opened her farm to families and children, allowing them to pet, feed, and interact with the rescued cows. These exchanges, Malia insisted, cultivate compassion. In sharp deviation from the vitriolic nature of cow vigilantism, Malia’s subjectivity of bovine animals stems from a motivation to care. When compassion and love are seen as concrete expressions of non-violence, a view propounded by Gandhi (Burgat, 2003), it becomes apparent that cow protection for the subjects is not simply abstinence from beef consumption but the active enactment of virtues such as kindness, empathy, and tenderness.
This desire to care grows out of actual bovine bodies. Here, the cow does not function purely as a “primordial symbol” (Govindrajan, 2018, p. 8) but is a dynamic corporeal being. In the previous vignette, for example, it was the poisoning of cows and sites of physical suffering that compelled Malia to focus her efforts on rescuing abandoned and infirm cattle. In this context, the cow itself is a co-constructive player in its own conservation (Albert, Luque, & Courchamp, 2018). Its anthropomorphic traits draw in human attention and concern. One participant, a lawyer and owner of a gaushala, described cows as “gentle, very affectionate” creatures. The charismatic image of the cow heightens its symbolic potency. Its human and specifically maternal like characteristics elevate the semiotic device of gau mata (mother cow); that is, conceptions of the cow as “good, whole, pure, and embodying all aspects of the cosmos within her” (Korom, 2000). When constructing the cow metaphor then, the activists I spoke to foregrounded animal materiality. This form of relatedness springs from routinized relationships with cows that involve tactile connections such as feeding and petting, giving rise to what Govindrajan (2018) terms affective14 intimacies. Through daily acts of care and nurturing, an “intimate bodily knowledge” of and “affective proximity” to the cow develops. In this context, ahimsa is not just a metaphysical concept but an embodied reality suffused with animal love and affection.

But a relatedness embedded in tangible acts does not necessarily conflict with the Hindu Right’s symbolic attachments to the sacred cow. Instead, the everyday relationship between cow and human adds depth and texture to the abstract gau mata figure; real and imagined bovine bodies together inform conceptions of cow protectionism. Dr. Patel was one such participant whose early childhood was immersed in ordinary, quotidian interactions with cattle. A surgeon

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14 I understand affect in this thesis to mean an embodied reaction to the world one inhabits. Affect has both interior and exterior manifestations, and is experienced by individuals as well as collectivities (Skoggerd & Waterson, 2015).
by training and now the chairperson of the BJP’s Animal Husbandry and Dairying Department, Dr. Patel grew up working on his father’s farm. He reminisced about summers spent in his native village tending to cows and buffaloes, drinking cow milk, and eating cow ghee. Such bodily substances are integral to symbolic enactments of the sacred cow concept (Govindrajan, 2018, p. 8). Daily milk consumption, for example, strengthened Dr. Patel’s cow veneration. He proclaimed: “The cow is called the mother of the universe. She is the mother of all living creatures. She gives happiness to all.” This deep-seated reverence for gau mata in turn heightens the significance of real cows and the “gifts [cow derivatives]” they yield, thereby binding physical matter and symbolic meaning. Intimate spaces marked by the production and consumption of material substances from actual cows foster close connections between cow protectionists and bovine animals, and ultimately with what the sacred cow comes to symbolize through its physical forms.

With this interlinking of real cows and representations of bovinity, it becomes possible to understand how secular arguments are layered onto socio-religious beliefs. Dr. Patel, for example, extended discussions of the cow’s divinity to the economic and environmental realms to spotlight the instrumentality of cow protection. In relation to Panchagavya, he underlined how the five cow derivatives can be used in organic farming. Not only do these products supposedly have purifying qualities, they also keep the soil fertile and healthy. In Dr. Patel’s view, the use of Panchagavya in agriculture increases crop yields and spurs economic growth. Another interlocutor I spoke to, Dr. Sharma, a chemist and member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing Hindu organization, spoke extensively about the environmental benefits of cow protection: cow manure as renewable energy; decreased greenhouse gas emissions; and the use of cow dung as organic fertilizer. When the motivations behind cow protection are elucidated
this way, we come to see how the rationalizing of cow protection at the individual level reflects the secularizing of cow slaughter policies at the national level.

Environmental and economic lines of reasoning, often shot through with pseudoscientific claims, legitimize religious imperatives by imbuing them with scientific understanding of environmental concerns (Hultgren, 2015, p. 20), a tactic to build political support for the national beef ban across class, caste, and religious groups. By secularizing cow protection, the participants in this study do not aim to shift the locus of the movement away from religion, however. They deploy secular and rational logic to support the religious and emotional impulse behind cow protection. For example, Dr. Patel, when discussing the utility of cow protection, highlighted the idea of a cow-based economy in which the cow and its products lie squarely at the center of rural empowerment, health, and social and economic development. These themes of modernity and development will re-emerge in the next chapter. In treating the cow as the nation’s “savior,” the sacred cow concept is brought to bear on matters outside religion’s orbit.

What becomes apparent, in this way, is the blurring of objective and subjective worlds of human-bovine relations. Through “mapping practices” (Rogowska-Stangret, 2018), the participants sketch a cow protection landscape that contains shifting boundaries between materiality and imagination; rationality and emotion; and actual bovines and the holy cow. As Rogowska-Stangret (2018) posits, such open, elastic boundaries produce manifold meanings. In the context of cow protection, the porous boundaries between secular and sacred cast the cow symbol anew, transforming it from a religious to a national emblem. As such, intimate perspectives on the holy cow, while differentiated from communalizing bovine politics, continue to uphold the Hindu Right’s cow protection project. In doing so, the preexisting polarizing tones
of cow slaughter legislation are re-engineered into new forms of communalization put forward as justifiable and indeed necessary for the nation to thrive.

“We Should Respect the Cow:” Non-Violence and Moral Disgust

The symbolic and material dimensions of cow protection described above demonstrate how intimacy works in dynamic relation (Pain & Staeheli, 2014) with spectacular cow protectionism. This point becomes particularly salient in connection to cow-related violence. Previously, I discussed how affective intimacies produce an ethic of animal care. Crucially, however, commitments to non-violence also generate feelings of moral disgust that impel the elimination of the object of disgust, often through violent and exclusionary means. In what follows, I will focus on this seemingly paradoxical relationship between ahimsa and violence in relation to the cow protection movement.

Atul, a lawyer and fierce champion of anti-slaughter laws, was catapulted into the cow protection movement following an encounter with a cattle rearer in his home state of Kerala. In 2013, on Makar Sankranti, a Hindu festival, Atul visited a cattle rearer to provide ritualistic offerings to the farmer’s cows, as is custom during Makar Sankranti. When Atul arrived at the farm, he noticed that the farmer’s cows were being hauled onto a truck. Upon further inquiry, the farmer informed Atul that the cattle were being transported to the butcher. This realization led Atul to confront the cattle herder who stated, defensively, that if Atul was so invested in the wellbeing of the cattle, he should purchase them himself. Believing it was his religious duty to safeguard these sentient beings, Atul decided to buy the animals. He later went on to found his own gaushala to shelter and protect cows from situations like the one he witnessed. Given the nourishment and sustenance that cattle provide, Atul views the slaughtering of these creatures with moral abhorrence. He conceives the cow as a nurturing, giving, and sustaining force—“just
like a mother.” It is precisely these gendered attributes that compel the safeguarding of bovine animals. For Atul and others in the study, moral outrage in the face of animal violence stems from cosmological constructions of the cow as mother of the universe, a nourisher, and savior.

This form of non-violence towards animals is a point of departure from invocations of non-violence in the political domain. In Gujarat, for example, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism has spawned affiliations between hyperbolic vegetarianism, ahimsa, and purity. Ghassem-Fachandi (2010) demonstrates how leading up to and following the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom\(^\text{15}\) in Gujarat, Hindutva adherents co-opted the non-violence doctrine in the BJP-led state to perpetuate conglomeries of cruelty, death, impurity, and pollution. Hindu nationalist proponents rhetorically conjoined cow killing and social delinquency. The 2002 bloodbath in Gujarat was appraised as a ‘natural reaction’ to and purging of such flagrant tendencies in society. It is through the symbolic affinity between ahimsa and purity, when mediated by a vegetarian ethos, that non-violence becomes paradoxically implicated in the production of violence.

Ghassem-Fachandi (2011) further theorizes that non-violence manufactures disgust towards the meat substance and the actors, specifically Muslims, responsible for its materialization. Here, I refer to the author’s description of moral disgust as encompassing emotions of repulsion, aversion, and loathing. Ghassem-Fachandi asserts that the disgust affect does not arise out of empathy for an animal’s suffering. Instead, it flows from violent imaginings—a desire to dislodge the object of disgust. His ethnographic research in Gujarat shows that the bodily substances of beef—the blood, the animal carcass, and the gore of animal slaughter—evoke physical disgust. These deep levels of revulsion transmute into a sense of

\(^{15}\) In the Gujarat massacre, which lasted three days and was followed by months of rioting, 790 Muslims and 254 Hindu were murdered (BBC, 2005) and 150,000 people, the majority of whom were Muslim, were displaced (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012, p. 1). The pogrom sparked when a Muslim mob set fire to a train carrying Hindu pilgrims and a cadre of the Hindu Right. It was caused by an altercation in the train, which quickly escalated into a full-fledged attack that killed 58 passengers (Varshney, 2006).
moral disgust that is then projected onto actors involved in the beef preparation. In this way,
disgust can be understood as an embodied moral evaluation (Schnall, Clore, & Jordan, 2008);
disgust is the physical reaction to the transgression of non-violence during animal slaughter. The
language of disgust conveys an impulse to eliminate not only the beef-eating Muslim but also
what beef consumption comes to represent: a violation of ‘Hindu’ ideals. Ghassem-Fachandi
(2010) contends that such collective feelings of repugnance towards beef-eating practices
specifically and the Muslim community at large lent fuel to the mass violence unleashed during
the Gujarat pogrom.

As indicated in Atul’s activism, cow protection proponents also employ a moral disgust
verbiage. One of my interlocutors named Arun, for instance, bemoaned the use and abuse of
bovine creatures, including the movement of cattle in overloaded trucks; “rampant
crossbreeding;” and the illegal smuggling and slaughtering of cows in “horrible conditions.” For
cow protection advocates, the reduction of sentient beings into economic units for consumption
is particularly egregious because bovines are viewed as all-encompassing creatures: “They
[cows] give everything needed [for a household],” including manure, milk, and food. To kill
cattle is to show “simply no gratitude” for these life-sustaining animals.

Such expressions of moral disgust spring from the sacred cow symbol as well as the
interconnected relationship between human and animal, as opposed to the violent fantasies
brought to light during the Gujarat pogrom. Curiously, however, the subjects in this project
indirectly embroiled Muslims in controversy surrounding rising beef consumption. When
describing cow slaughter, they spatialized and localized cow killing to “certain communities
[Muslim neighborhoods],” in “specific states [with higher Muslim populations],” and within
illegal slaughterhouses located “across the border [in Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country].”
Clandestine violence structures these geographical imaginations. Malia, for example, described cow slaughter within Islamic areas as “hand in glove.” Arun further recalled childhood memories in West Bengal, an Indian state bordering Bangladesh, where he witnessed truckloads of cattle being illegally smuggled across the border. Using categories of legality and illegality, cow protectionists build crisis narratives that depict cow killing as an unbridled, covert, and insidious activity; this feeds into the Hindu Right’s use of disgust to stratify religious behavior into divisive binaries such as social compliance/social transgression, purity/pollution, and non-violence/violence.

These gradations of disgust reveal the scalar nature of cow protection. By situating cow slaughter within spatial configurations, the interviewees render disgusted reactions more diffuse. When the disgust affect is superimposed onto places rather than stable objects, communalizing narratives are obscured. Yet these perspectives are disposed to the same oppressive stances of Hindu nationalists, as evidenced by the participants’ creation of geographies of horror that single out and isolate predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. Through such “attritional” and “silent” (Davies, 2019) modes of subjugation, the interviewees get entangled in the Hindu Right’s hyperbolic vegetarian politics. The disgust affect produced vis-à-vis non-violence falls along a spectrum spanning intense loathing towards beef-eating Muslims in public life to a moral disgust bound by animal care in the intimate realm. Both forms, however, are a means to exert control—over diets, behaviors, beliefs. As such, care and intimacy are not as opposing to the spectacular violence of cow protection as one may have imagined. On the contrary, they exist along a spectrum wherein demonstrations of ahimsa and disgust percolate between individual and national levels. In the following section, I will transition from investigating this scalar structure of cow protection to the movement’s entwined private and public planes. In doing so, I aim to
shed light on explicit “openings of the double helix” (Dowler, Christian, and Ranjbar, 2014); that is, points of intersection that enable a co-constituting flow of ideas between intimate and spectacular cow protectionism.

**Constructions of National Identity**

As explicated earlier in this chapter, the Hindu Right mobilizes the sacred cow metaphor to fashion a national—indeed, a *natural*—identity out of the Hindu corpus. On the question of a national beef ban, the interlocutors similarly attended to a national imagination. Notions of nationality, religion, and culture indexed their views. It is in this manner that the cow protection champions I interviewed adopt the role of national subjects. As Berlant (1991) argues, a repository of traditional icons, images, and idioms create a national consciousness. Citizens internalize this collective imagery; it infiltrates private life. The interviewees, in considering the holy cow a part of the national repository, shifted from addressing the cow protection movement in intimate to national terms. In the following passage, I will demonstrate how this shift from individual to national subject decidedly aligns the interlocutors with the Hindu Right’s cow protection project.

When asked about what the cow symbolized to them, the activists in my study responded unanimously with ideas about India’s national heritage. They stressed that the cow has been central to Indian identity since the Vedic period. Dr. Sharma, for instance, narrated the story of prince Siddhartha Gautama, later christened Gautama Buddha, and his renouncement of meat eating after being exposed to animal suffering outside the walls of his royal enclosure. For Dr. Sharma, the storied history of the cow in Hinduism and other Dharmic religions showcases “our privilege, our culture. That is why we honor the cow.” The bovine symbol here operates as a “powerful anchor” (Hunt, 2018) that instills national pride. It forges associations between the
national collective and its past, summoning a history that binds citizens into a cohesive whole (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2010). Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridg (1995) observe that “culture-making includes the attentive construction of national histories, the revitalization of various traditional identities, and the production of national folk symbols.” The cow metaphor, when conferred the status of a national icon, becomes a vehicle for formulating historical narratives that privilege Hinduism over other religions. This culture-making secures the ascendancy of Hindu identity in the nation-building process.

The saffron brigade shapes a ‘national’ Hindu identity in opposition to the Muslim other. My interlocutors, on the other hand, demonstrated ambivalence towards the position of Muslims in the nation. In unpacking the role of the sacred cow in Indian history, they emphasized the fact that Mughal\textsuperscript{16} emperors issued a firman, or a royal mandate, decreeing a ban on cow slaughter. The Mughal Empire announced this ruling in cognizance of Hindu beliefs, a narrative that seemingly absorbs the Muslim community into the fold of national histories. Yet this inclusivity obfuscates the “kernel of homogenizing rigidity” (Basu et al., 1993) that pervades the cow protection movement. Indeed, on the question of beef consumption among religious groups outside Hinduism, the participants I interviewed contended that the views of the Hindu majority gain primacy in a democracy, and that minorities should “respect” the sensibilities of the dominant community. This sentiment is a central tenet of Hindu nationalism. Hindutva dogmas demand assimilation: Non-Dharmic religious groups are only incorporated into the nation on the condition that they acquiesce to the centrality of Hinduism in the Indian polity (Varshney, 1993).

In the case of cow protection, the Mughal empire’s saliency in my interviewees’ national imagination hinged on the adoption of anti-slaughter legislation. This conditionality exemplifies

\textsuperscript{16} The Mughal dynasty, Muslim rulers who were descendants of the Mongol Empire in Turkestan and the Middle East, held power over most areas in precolonial India in the 16th and 17th centuries. The East India Company dethroned the last Mughal king in 1858 (BBC, 2014).
the simultaneous threads of inclusion and alienation in Hindu nationalist ideology. The “semiotic force” of cow protection therefore enables the enactment of paradoxical compulsions in the creation of a national community (Appadurai, 1981).

To understand the paranoia surrounding Hindu majority and Muslim minority categories, we can turn to Arjun Appurdai’s theory of the anxiety of incompleteness. Appuradai asserts that in a nation-state the majority population desires national purity. The presence of minority groups precludes this national fantasy, however. A disposition towards homogeneity can then induce violent societal convulsions. Cow vigilantism instantiates such inclinations. A member of one militant cow protection outfit recently declared: “I am a cow patriot and want to free cows from the slavery of Muslim butchers. It’s better we shed our blood to save the blood of cows” (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In this statement, the cow protection movement is cast as a means to an end. Defending the purity of the sacred cow actualizes an untarnished ethnos; to ‘free’ cows is to homogenize the national collective. The urge to purify, much like in the case of the fynbos, seeps into intimate contexts as well. The interviewees’ tendency to craft a glorious Hindu past in order to shore up anti-slaughter policies serves to erase the history of religious minorities in India. Compared to cow vigilantism, this form of displacement is slow and drawn out and yet “predatory” (Appuradai, 2006, p. 51) in nature. It, in effect, communicates the same anxiety of incompleteness that underlies broader Hindu nationalist currents of cow protection.

While the participants I was in conversation with underscored the national significance of the cow symbol, they also noted that its sanctity has been diluted by centuries of foreign invasion. Dr. Sharma specifically pointed to the example of Goa, a state that was under Portuguese rule for more than four centuries (Vohra, 2017). He highlighted the etymology of the name Goa, emphasizing its roots in the Indian bison *Bos gaurus*. Regarding the state’s history
as a Portuguese territory, Dr. Sharma lamented the forcible conversion of “thousands” of Hindus to Christianity, and the coercion of converted Hindus into consuming beef as a humiliation tactic. After “1000 years of subjugation [by foreign powers],” India gained independence and was finally able to “exercise cultural freedom,” Dr. Sharma said. This autonomy includes an open devotion to and reverence of the holy cow, a religious expression that was necessarily borne out of struggle against oppression.

Shabnum Tejani’s notion of a politics of hurt, which Tejani articulates as “moral injury” (Tejani, 2019) brought on by religious offense, captures Dr. Sharma’s sense of loss. Feelings of hurt are highlighted in responses to those that condemn the pseudoscience behind Panchagavya, criticize the religious antagonism and economic costs of anti-slaughter laws, and call the national ban on beef consumption “antiquated” and “bogus.” For cow protection activists, such attitudes signal a disremembering of tradition. This “forgetting” exhibits a lack of pride, esteem, and dignity derived from the sacred cow, and by extension, Hindu heritage and identity.

Based on this perspective, the traditional cow symbol necessitates revival (Bhattacharjee, 2018) in order to remedy the profaned sanctity of the sacred cow and the psychic wound it inflicts. In an effort to resuscitate the cattle complex, Malia is spearheading a scheme that envisions the creation of eco-villages, a concept reminiscent of village structures in “ancient times.” An eco-village is a community that houses a gaushala, promotes cow derivatives in all areas of rural life, and generates employment opportunities by establishing a market for cow-based organic products. Malia’s project evinces a nostalgia for “traditional” values, which the interlocutors believe are fast eroding in a modernizing India. The participants I interviewed specifically highlighted industrialization as a primary cause behind rising beef consumption. They commented on how the Green Revolution introduced pesticides in India’s agrarian sector,
outdating the use of cow manure as organic fertilizer and cooking fuel. Industrialization also catalyzed the growth of factory farms and the mechanization of agricultural activity, thereby rendering the role of draught cattle breeds in rural society obsolete. Prior to industrialization, bullocks had been integral for agricultural activity. They were used for ploughing, weeding, harvesting, threshing, irrigation, and transportation (Jitendra & Ghai, 2017). But the transformation of dairy farming “decimated Indian [cow] breeds.” As Atul remarked, today profit margins and productivity calculations subvert the more intimate ties between farmers and their cattle. This phenomenon not only dilutes the significance of the holy cow metaphor, it also normalizes the infliction of animal pain and cruelty, Atul argued.

The twin-engines of capitalist-driven loss and longing for a ‘golden’ past bring to light moral panics precipitated by modernization. In Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right, the book’s authors contend that shifting socio-economic conditions beginning in the 70s, including economic liberalization, burgeoning competition, urbanization, and consumerism, have produced a social anomie (Basu, Datta, Sarkar, Sarkar & Sen, 1993, p. 112). As a countervailing force, traditional systems based on shared images of unity have resurged. Hindutva is one such framework of collectivism that anchors individuals in the midst of rapid social-political and economic change.

Demands for a national beef ban, as outshoots of the Hindutva apparatus, allay the existential uncertainty induced by reconfigurations of the national landscape. They do so by offering a set of moral codes rooted in “glorious ancestral” (Sagar, 2020) ideals. For the activists in my project, eschewing cow slaughter is one such traditional principle. They articulated degraded environmental practices as a symptom of decomposing morality in modern society. On this point, Malia said, “how much water is being used…to first raise the animal? Then how many
gallons of water are wasted…all that blood and muck and everything flows into the rivers.” She situated increasing beef production and consumption in the context of sweeping societal transformations: industrialization, commercialization, and the growing consumerism of India’s middle class. In light of these conditions, “blood” and “muck” come to embody the broader social anomie outlined above. The values represented by cow protection—ahimsa, compassion, and respect for animal life—thus fill a moral vacuum that the participants believe permeates modern India. Viewed through the lens of Hindu nationalism, cow protection counterpoises the fragmentation of a collective moral ethos deemed fundamental to unity and stability in India’s national community.

**The Quest for Dignity and Authenticity**

At the center of the participants’ grievances is the desire for authenticity and dignity, two organizing principles of Indian identity politics (Pingle & Varshney, 2006). The sentiment among cow protection advocates and Hindu fundamentalists alike is why be “ashamed of providing for [the prohibition of cow slaughter] frankly and boldly” (Bhatia, 2017). In 2017, during an event dedicated to the promotion of the *Glorious Indian Cow*, Subramanian Swamy, a BJP member of parliament, declared: “We should be proud to say that we believe in the cow.” In his view, cow protection signifies the “decolonization of our mind.” As Charles Taylor (1992) argues, mis-recognition functions as a type of oppression; it distorts and degrades a group’s self-image. The maligning of the sacred cow can similarly be understood as a form of subjugation. Swamy’s statements, however, conflate mis-recognition of Hinduism with denunciation of beef bans. Criticisms against divisive bovine politics are viewed in the same light as the dehumanizing effects imposed by colonial views of Hinduism. The reaction to the former is to defend the religious sensibilities propping up anti-slaughter laws. When cow protection advances
the demand for dignity, the movement becomes crucially implicated in the Hindu Right’s project to remedy erasures effectuated by colonial policies and exact respect for Hindu belief systems.

In parallel to the quest for dignity, cow protection brings to the fore an ideal of authenticity. Taylor unpacks authenticity as the expression of an original self. Malia exhibited the authenticity impulse when discussing dietary cultures. She stated: “What works in the West or any other country just doesn't work the same way in India…we have our own unique identity…our own unique cultural heritage.” As with the demand for dignity, the authenticity ideal grows out of the postcolonial pursuit (Cederlåf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, p. 22) of an indigenous cultural consciousness. It also stems from the dislocation of an internal moral compass (Taylor, 1992, p. 28) spurred by modernizing forces (Mawdsley, 2003). To counter this displacement, individuals seek realignment with social mores and ethics that are ‘true’ to the culture in which they emerge (Taylor, 1992, p. 31). In the context of cow protection, this quest includes the search for an authentic, or pure, Hindu self, one that can endure profound changes within the nation (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2010). Given that cow protectionism is embedded in notions of tradition, the movement serves as a potent vehicle for ideas of authenticity. It legitimates Hindu cultural values that cow protection activists necessarily see as distinct, unique, and affirming.

Taylor argues that the demand for dignity and authenticity operate in both intimate and public spheres. In the former, they materialize through close proximity and interactions with others. In the case of cow protection, feelings of misrecognition transpire over social transactions where actors mischaracterize abstinence from beef-eating as “old-fashioned” and “backward.” This withholding of recognition imposes psychic wounds. What ensues is the struggle to affirm one’s beliefs in the face of debasement. At the public level, Hindutva discourse similarly gives
voice to real and imagined religious offense. By co-opting the language of dignity, Hindu nationalists exploit the holy cow metaphor to formulate an authenticity ideal rooted in upper-caste Hindu beliefs. National subjects then converge around and derive cultural belonging from this articulation of authenticity, one that both remedies a politics of hurt and remains steadfast against an onslaught of modernizing influences. Given that the sacred cow complex, and nature symbolism more broadly, serves as a timeless representation of the nation, it transforms into a crucible for national purity, and by extension, ideas of authenticity and dignity.

Intimate and public planes are interwoven in this way. The Hindutva brigade mobilizes a politics of hurt, felt acutely at the individual level, to boost the demand for dignity and urge for authenticity at the national level. Assertions of dignity and authenticity in the public sphere are then incorporated into personal frameworks on cow protectionism, and crystallized and sharpened through dialogical contact with others. Such crosscutting connections trouble the notion of an intimate-spectacular dichotomy. They further complicate conceptions of a hierarchal relationship between national discourse/events and everyday life, in which the latter is viewed as a blank terrain where macro-political processes play out (Pain & Smith, p. 6). Instead, when we unpack the cow protection movement through the intimate-spectacular double helix, we come to see how the “quiet politics” (Askins, 2014) of belonging, hurt, authenticity, and dignity gets wrapped up in and is co-productive of the Hindu Right’s more spectacular bovine politics. As such, the intimate and spectacular realms of cow protectionism are not just interconnected but complementary and synergistic. Points of intersection between the two serve as productive spaces where “opportunities lie to resist, have dialogue, influence, and act” (Pain & Smith, p. 7).

**Conclusion**
With growing sectarian tensions, India has witnessed a concomitant rise in cow vigilante attacks—paroxysms of violence targeted primarily at lower-caste Hindus and Muslims. This chapter, however, has adopted a broader view of cow protection, seeking to unveil the micropolitics of the movement. Using the double helix concept, I argued that the intimate and spectacular levels are separate but interlocking realms of bovine politics. To begin, I looked at the historical antecedents of the contemporary cow protection movement. Here, I underscored that the sacred cow symbol serves as a metonymic projection of the Hindu rashtra: Saving the cow equates to saving the nation. I showed that cow protection advocates have drawn on secular reasoning (e.g., environmental benefits and economic rationality) as well as socio-religious arguments to buoy anti-slaughter legislation. Yet these efforts are troubled by the economic infeasibility of a national beef ban. It is instead through ‘intimate turns’ that we come to see how the emotional and rational, symbolic and material elements of human-bovine relations are interwoven; this is because cow protection at the individual level is grounded in interactions with real bovine animals. Such relations engender affective intimacies that give rise to an ethic of care. I showed that ahimsa, animal love, and care are not antithetical to hyperbolic vegetarianism; rather, through the mechanism of moral disgust they enable the Hindu Right’s political use of disgust. I then shed light on explicit openings in the intimate-spectacular double helix, which become apparent when the holy cow metaphor is situated within national identity constructions. A politics of hurt, desire for authenticity, and quest for dignity connect intimate and spectacular spaces in dynamic relation. What becomes apparent, in this respect, are the mutually enhancing ties between different scales of cow protectionism.

The intimate-spectacular framework invites us to rethink not just cow protection but the overarching green-saffron nexus in which the movement is located. When the relationship
between Hindu nationalism and nature is examined at national and individual levels, we begin to see its distinct manifestations: its spectacularly violent expressions but also its more subtle formations contingent on love, care, and non-violence. These are ideals animal protection organizations, including, for example, The Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations (FIAPO), uphold. FIAPO has publicly denounced the Hindu Right’s cow protection project. But by attending to different scales, and thereby recognizing how environmental commitments sit alongside and actively contribute to the green-saffron nexus, groups like FIAPO may be poised to resist the multiple intersections between nature, violence, and Hindutva. In the next chapter, I turn to a different scale—regional modernities—and investigate how even opposing linkages between Hindu nationalist and environmental discourses come to buttress the concept of a Hindu nation-state.
Chapter (Three): Regional Modernities, Hindutva, and Dam Building

Introduction

On 30th October 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi traveled to his home state of Gujarat to inaugurate the dynamic lighting display at the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), the biggest dam in India and the second largest in the world (Aljazeera, 2017; The Times of India, 2020). The tricolor of the Indian flag was projected onto the mammoth concrete structure, which currently stands at 138.68 meters. Bright neon lights flashed across the Narmada River, while loud, fast-paced music boomed in the background (Dhabi, 2017). Doordarshan National, the public service broadcaster under the Indian government, televised the inauguration, marking it a “proud moment for the country.” The broadcaster described the light exhibit as a technological triumph, one that “reach[ed] for the stars as if trying to bring them down to add more brightness to the already vibrant lights.” The lights, music, and glitter epitomize the notion of a ‘Vibrant Gujarat,’ a slogan that captures the state’s image as an investment hub and economic powerhouse. The SSP itself, as one of the nation’s most ambitious hydroelectric projects, stands at the center of these representations of Gujarat as a thriving, prosperous state.

Twenty-three years ago, in Uttarakhand, a state north of Gujarat, a spectacle of a different kind took place. Sunderlal Bahugana, a prominent environmental activist, undertook one of his numerous fasts to protest the Tehri dam on the Ganga river, a holy site for Hindus. In sharp contrast to celebrations at the SSP light inauguration, Bahugana’s fast lamented the destruction wrought by the Tehri dam. At a height of 260.5 meters (The Pioneer, 2016), the dam is a colossal infrastructure project, a feat of human engineering. For Bahugana and his allies, however, the dam signified a “poisoned” Ganga (Sharma, 2009).
Mega hydroelectric designs, as “modern world-making projects” (Stoetzer, 2018), are important signifiers of development. Development itself, as Gustavo Esteva describes, sits at the center of a powerful set of “semantic constellation[s]” (Esteva, 1992, as cited in Sivaramakrishnan & Agarwal, 2003, p. 3). In the SSP and Tehri dam movements, Hindu nationalist ideology was integrated into and shaped this semantic system in distinct ways. In this chapter, I will specifically analyze reoccurring idioms of Hindu fundamentalism in the anti-Tehri protests and Gujarat’s pro-dam countermovement in the 1990s and early 2000s. I have chosen to compare these case studies to spotlight the contradictory modes through which right-wing Hindu narratives arose in the two dam contexts. In the anti-Tehri movement, actors such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist outfit, deployed exclusionary religious rhetoric to resist damming the Ganga (Sharma, 2009). Yet the same rhetoric was used by Gujarat’s pro-dam countermovement, a coalition of state functionaries, religious organizations, farmers, and industrialists\(^\text{17}\) (Thomas, 2013) to advocate for dam building in the state. How is it that two seemingly opposing positions on dam building and its environmental impacts could nevertheless converge?

By engaging with infrastructure development in nationalistic terms, both anti-dam and pro-dam actors advanced a common set of Hinduizing dynamics: compounding religious divides, inflaming anxieties around national integrity, and consolidating Hindu supremacy. This chapter is primarily concerned with exploring how these patterns transformed dam building discourse in Gujarat and Uttarakhand. To be clear, I do not critique the use of religion in and of itself in environmental movements; instead, what I aim to examine is how hegemonic Hindu identity

\(^{17}\) For the purposes of this chapter, I use pro-dam and anti-dam as broad analytical categories. In reality, both the SSP and Tehri dam movements were witness to shifting alliances and interests. For more information on evolving dynamics within these movements, see Georgina Drew’s River Dialogues: Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology of Dams on the Sacred Ganga and Ranjit Dwivedi’s Conflict and Collective Action: The Sardar Sarovar Project in India.
precluded other imaginings of place in the pro-SSP and anti-Tehri protests. My analysis follows that of Emma Mawdsley (2005), who argues that environmental politics are not “immune” from saffronizing forces that pervade other sectors of public life in India.

To unpack different modalities of Hindutva in the two dam building case studies, we must first understand Hindu nationalism as an emergent assemblage. Donald Moore (2003) theorizes this term as an articulation that grows out of a confluence of “sedimented” social-political and economic arrangements. Under the emergent assemblage framework, the articulation of religious fundamentalism is necessarily constructed and contingent, rooted in regional discourses, structures, and practices. Using this ground up perspective, we come to see why Hindutva ideology arose in uneven, divergent forms in the SSP and Tehri dam movements.

The emergent assemblage framework is situated within K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal’s (2003) construction of a regional modernities analytic. Regional modernities refer to social geographies that give rise to specific modernizing pathways. In their analysis, Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal refer to ‘region’ as nation-state, but they note the term’s elasticity in capturing both subnational and supranational variants of socio-political entities. I use the phrase region in the former sense of the word, to reference districts in India that are sites where modernity is produced. Regional modernities do not, however, exist in isolation, insulated from external forces; rather, the authors conceptualize them as “nodal points” located within an interconnected web of places and social milieus that share relational histories. By employing the regional modernities concept, Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal intend to theoretically move away from the local/global binary. They engage instead with “the proliferation of difference” in as well as relational routes between places. What this demonstrates is regional configurations of global processes, or the production of multiple modernities that are markedly local but
nonetheless transformed by translocating flows of people, ideas, and images within and between nation-states.

Regional modernities is a useful framework, visually and conceptually, to understand Hindutva formations in the two dam building discourses. Given that religious nationalism is a modern phenomenon (Devare, 2009, as cited in Kinnvall & Svensonn, 2010), it too coheres through region-specific pressures and structures. Yet Hindu nationalism also transpires out of relational routes that connect and transcend regional boundaries. The regional modernities framework thus enables us to shift between the particularities and overlaps of Hindu nationalist ideology in Gujarat and Uttarakhand.

What significance did these regionally bounded and unbounded Hinduizing narratives have for the anti-Tehri and pro-SSP discourses? I show that because Hindu nationalism functions as an emergent assemblage, it gained currency at the local level. In acquiring region-specific meaning, Hindutva rhetoric appealed to a broad array of constituents, and hence was leveraged by dam building opponents and proponents. Second, through nodal points of connection, Hindutva formations in the two dam movements, while regionally contingent, propagated the same exclusionary logic of national Hinduizing patterns. It is this simultaneous contingency and continuity that enabled Hindu nationalist actors to transform the dam sites into “terrain[s] of power and difference” (Moore, Pandian, and Kosek, 2003, p. 47). Such interventions were made possible because dam building itself is a way of “doing politics” (Folch, 2019, p. 4). By interjecting into and shaping this politics, Hindutva forces engineered new, powerfully coercive geographies.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will first briefly chart the development of the SSP and Tehri dam, tracing prominent arguments that were invoked in support and resistance of each
project. In this section, I will attend to key contextual elements of Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s modernizing trajectories to illuminate Hindu nationalism as an emergent assemblage. I will then briefly explicate hydroelectric landscapes as “mutable” place-making sites where opposing meanings, symbols, and identities collide. These conflictive spaces lend themselves to “creative imaginings of power” (Jayal, 1998), which I argue set the stage for Hindu nationalism to become firmly lodged in the discursive fields of dam building. From this theoretical background, I will unpack the making of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through expressions of threat and insecurity as well as pride and unity in the dam disputes. I will end by discussing why the regional modernities framework is integral to understanding the relationship between place and power in Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s dam building contexts.

**Background and Context**

Construction of both the SSP and Tehri dam received intense public backlash. They were at the center of highly charged debates about development and modernity, environmental protection and justice, and ethnic and religious identities. For some, the dams represented growth and economic prosperity; for others, environmental despoliation and displacement. In the case of Uttarakhand’s Tehri dam, proponents claimed that the project would generate 6,532 million units of energy and provide irrigation for 270,000 hectares of land (Drew, 2018). Environmental assessments, however, reported a significant risk of infrastructural collapse due to the dam’s location in the seismically active Himalayan region (Jayal, 1998, as cited in Drew, 2018). For one, large impoundments of water on land due to the dam’s weight could trigger high magnitude earthquakes (Rao, 1988). The project site is also situated within the deformed Himalayan belt, where active geodynamic processes induce rock failure. Slope volatility, fluctuations in river

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18 Unless specified, I use development and modernity interchangeably. This follows from K.Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal’s (2013) argument that development is the cornerstone of modernity.
flow, and high sediment discharge further increase the risk of project failure (Bandyopadhyay & Gyawali, 1994).

Beyond these hazardous factors, critics have raised a number of environmental justice concerns. The Tehri project has displaced nearly 85,000 people in the Tehri district and surrounding villages, while the benefits of dam building, including access to energy and drinking water, has primarily accrued to industries and New Delhi residents. Moreover, the state government planned and executed the rehabilitation process without inputs from the affected persons. As a result, resettled primary cultivators have been forced to transition from a subsistence to market-based economy (Asthana, 2012). The unpredictability of the latter coupled with low crop diversity and lack of access to irrigation water in the resettlement colonies have led to significant loss of livelihood. Despite these challenges, dam construction commenced in 1978. This decision caused project opposition to erupt into a full-fledged movement, and led to the establishment of the Tehri Dam Opposition Struggle Committee19 (TBVSS) (Drew, 1998).

The nationalist organization VHP joined resistance efforts in the mid-1990s, as it became increasingly clear that dam construction threatened to profane the holy Ganga river. While anti-Tehri actors evoked religious symbols denoting the Ganga’s sacredness, the VHP’s aggressive religious posturing overshadowed the more immediate environmental and economic concerns of dam building. Indeed, Emma Mawdsley (2005) asserts that the VHP’s activism stemmed from “pragmatic power politics—” to shore up electoral support for the BJP and promote a Hinduizing agenda—rather than environmental stewardship. Yet the VHP was not the only dam opponent to invoke Hindu nationalistic tropes. Actors such as environmental activist Sunderlal Bahugana, who joined forces with the VHP in 2000, also employed polarizing rhetoric to delineate between

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19 Anti-dam demonstrations waxed and waned in the 1980s and 90s, but they entered a period of dormancy in the 2000s (Ishizaka, 2006). By 2006, project construction was completed (Drew, 2018).
those for and against dam building. In 1996, during one of Bahugana’s hunger strikes, the environmentalist stated: “Muslim emperor Aurangzeb refused water to his dying father, but “we Hindus” even offer water to the dead” (Sharma, 2009). Here, Bahugana incorporated anti-Muslim sentiment into assertions of resource control. By conjoining resistance to the Tehri project with an ostensible religious morality, Bahugana not only engaged in religious ‘othering,’ he also located the Ganga’s “water” under the ownership of “we Hindus,” thereby mapping resistance and support for the Tehri dam along disruptive us/them, friend/enemy, and insider/outsider binaries.

Similar environmental and political currents shaped anti-dam and pro-dam protests in Gujarat. The SSP, part of the Narmada Valley Development Project, which former deputy prime minister Vallabhbhai Patel first envisaged in 1946 (Dutta, 2017), was intended to provide irrigation for 1.8 million hectares of land and drinking water to 40 million people (Dwivedi, 2006). But project objections beginning in the 1980s underscored that displaced individuals were neither consulted prior to the project’s implementation, nor did they receive adequate compensation for loss of land and livelihood (Ranjan, 2018). By 1989, Narmada Bachao Andola (NBA), an environmental justice movement spearheaded by local tribal groups and social activists such as Mehda Patkar, surged to global prominence, drawing in Adivasis, international organizations, and environmental activists. In 1996, the Supreme Court stalled further progress on dam construction in order to review the rehabilitation of affected families (Dhabi, 2017). Then, in 2000, the court sanctioned an increase to the dam’s height, and stipulated that the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam, the body overseeing the dam’s development, execute the recommended resettlement and remediation measures (Luxion, 2017).

The height of the dam has increased every year since the judgment, which has led to
severe flooding in surrounding locations. In 2004, floods inundated seven villages in the Vadodara district of Gujarat. Eight villages in the Mehsana district witnessed flooding again in 2008 after a 30m long breach in the Narmada main canal. Even data on the efficiency of the SSP is mixed. A citizen monitoring program revealed that out of the 2044 villages surveyed, water reached 82% of villages, of which 20% received water for fewer than 30 days out of the 90 day study period (Luxion, 2017). In urban municipalities, however, there has been a 50% increase in water supply based on 2008 levels (Performance Assessment Project, 2016, as cited in Luxion, 2017). Yet water distribution among Gujarat’s cities is highly uneven, with much of the project’s water directed towards industrial or commercial districts instead of households (Luxion, 2017). After a ten-year battle to construct the SSP, the project has not fully lived up to the promise of alleviating water scarcity. Indeed, the NBA bestowed it the label of “India’s largest planned disaster” (Thomas, 2013).

Despite increases to the SSP’s height, NBA actors have continued to demand for termination of dam building and fairer compensation packages. In response, project proponents have repeatedly attempted to quell dissent. A segment of this countermovement utilized the Hindu Right’s dominant modes of political mobilization to reconfigure dam discourse around Gujarati nativism, declaring decisions about the SSP as Gujarat’s “exclusive domain” (Thomas, 2013) and recasting the project as the state’s “lifeline” (Mehta, 2011, p. 44).

Gujarat’s political machine, underpinned by ethno-religious nationalism and authoritarian development, fueled the pro-dam movement. The coalescence of these two forces, which were explicitly wedded together by Modi, chief minister of Gujarat between 2001 and 2014 (The Economic Times, 2020), has fundamentally shaped the state’s trajectory since the 1990s. Technocratic development, in this regard, forms a core component of Gujarat’s emergent Hindu
nationalist assemblage.

Infrastructure plays a key role here. Gujarat turned into India’s development success story following economic liberalization in 1991. Privatization and greater investment in the industrial, financial, and construction sectors generated job opportunities and expanded the state’s labor market. The once dominant textile industry was replaced by a new, more flourishing commercial sector. ‘From mills to malls’ became a popular slogan underlining the state's rapid progress at the turn of the century (Bobbio, 2012). Economic reforms also paved the way for private investment in infrastructure development. Large physical structures served as tangible symbols of the region’s burgeoning growth (Luxion, 2017). In 2009, the Gujarat Infrastructure Development Board (GIDB) claimed that Gujarat’s prosperity eclipsed that of other states due to “availability of quality physical, industrial and social infrastructure” in the region (GIDB, 2009, as cited in Luxion, 2017).

Concurrent to this economic development, the BJP began its ascent in state electoral politics. It did so by marrying development with ethno-nationalist and religious propaganda, a political strategy that has gained ground in a region fraught with sectarian tensions. This tactic has spawned narratives painting Gujaratis as business savvy and naturally disposed to engaging with modern markets. Such rhetorical strategies fuse entrepreneurial spirit with a Gujarati ethos (Bobbio, 2012). As Tomasso Bobio argues, constructions of a Gujarati ethos stem from traits (e.g., individual drive, courage, and self-initiative) purportedly belonging to traditional mercantile elites, a state demographic predominantly made up of upper-caste Hindus and Jains. By drawing symbolic affinities between Gujarati ethos and a sharp business acumen, Hindutva stalwarts propound that the former gives rise to the latter. It is against the backdrop of this cultural politics that Gujarati actors began voicing a full-throated defense of the SSP plan in the
late 1980s and early 1990s.

Unlike development in Gujarat, economic growth in Uttarakhand is lower than the national average (Mehta, 1999, preface). The majority of the state’s population is employed in the agricultural sector, which remains largely underdeveloped (Aggarwal & Gupta, 1995, p. 17) due to poor integration of regional needs and local demands in development planning (Mehta, 1999, p. 14). While progress and modernization are mainstays of Gujarat’s political economy, “backwardness” (Sharma, 2011, p. 107) and economic stagnation constitute defining features of Uttarakhand’s state image.

Despite this torpid reputation, the region has been a locus for social change. It has witnessed sweeping movements that tackle issues related to big dam building, resource exploitation, and caste discrimination (Sharma, 2011, p. 104). The anti-Tehri protests themselves came on the heels of the Chipko movement, a peasant movement against commercial logging that catapulted the destruction of Himalayan ecology into public imagination (Guha, 2010). Bahugana was a key figure in the Chipko demonstrations. He generated significant traction for the movement (Drew, 2018) by invoking Hindu symbols, idioms, and mythological figures, a strategy seen in the anti-Tehri agitations as well (Guha, 1994, p. 140, as cited in Tomalin, 2002).

This tactic built momentum for the anti-dam movement by locating it within the sacred geographies of Garhwal Himalayas, where the Tehri dam is located, and Uttarakhand at large. A Hindu pilgrimage destination, the region is believed to be the site of the Holy Trinity,20 Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. At the center of this religious landscape is the Ganga (Drew, 2017, p. 3). Viewed as a “living goddess” (Drew, 2017, p. 3), the Ganga is considered the holiest river in India, with numerous Hindu devotees traveling yearly to pray at its banks, congregate for

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20 The three essential Hindu gods, Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer), make up the Holy Trinity in Hinduism (BBC, 2013).
religious festivals, and perform purification rites in its holy waters (Taylor, 2013). These deep, enduring attachments to the Ganga served as a chief animating force for opposition to the Tehri dam.

Such sacred geographies are integrated into emergent forms of Hindu nationalism. Hindutva adherents frequently appropriate and absorb the Ganga’s sacred import into the saffronizing project (Sharma, 2011, p. 107). In the 1983 *Ekamata yajna* (sacrifice for unity) movement, for example, the VHP carried Ganga water in *kalashas* (pots) to signify Hindu solidarity during processions that erupted across the country (Tambiah, 1996, p. 248). More recently, Modi chose the city of Varanasi, where the Ganga flows through, as his parliamentary seat for the 2014 general elections. In a statement laden with religious and political symbolism, he announced his candidacy for prime minister: “When I said that Ma Ga (Mother Ganges) has called me, these words spontaneously emerged from within. Perhaps these were not even words, they were the manifestation of a spiritual stream flowing within me.” Once coming to power, Modi’s administration reconstituted the Ministry of Water Resources to the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation (Mallet, 2017, preface). Following this, Yogi Adityanath contended that non-Hindus should be prohibited from entering Har Ki Pauri, a ghat (wide flight of steps that lead down to the river water) on the Ganga’s banks in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, because of the security threat they might pose to the sacred site (Hindustan Times, 2014). Such exclusionary ways of projecting the Ganga permeated into the anti-Tehri protests, operating as a prism through which actors constructed relations between mega hydroprojects, the Ganga river, and Hindu identity, as will be explored in the second half of this chapter.

What I have attempted to show here are “currents of place-making” (Subramaniam, 2003, p. 263) that came to bear on emergent Hindu nationalism in Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s dam
building debates. In the SSP case, assertions of ethno-religious nationalism were located in convergences between a Gujarati ethos and developmental forces. Following economic liberalization, Gujarat’s accelerated growth forged a new logic of modernization predicated on infrastructure, commercialization, and global private investment. Neoliberal notions of development and the growing aspirations of the middle class intersected powerfully with regional *asmīta* (pride) in Gujarati ethos. Affiliations between the two strengthened and magnified under the BJP, and came to the fore in the pro-dam countermovement.

Hindutva ideologues adopted a contrasting stance in relation to the Tehri dam. Regional differences may underlie this divergence. For one, Uttarakhand has not experienced the same level of prosperity as Gujarat. It has one of lowest growth rates in the country, and, as a result, the state’s modernizing path does not lend itself to stable coalescences between development and Hinduizing discourses. Hindutva narratives in the anti-Tehri protests instead sprung from environmental movement histories in Uttarakhand that centered the state’s sacred geographies. Crucially, opposition to the dam hinged on preserving the religious, cultural, and national significance of the Ganga. Evocations of right-wing Hindu ideology in Uttarakhand thus emanated out of interconnected environmental and religious strands in the region’s history, and hence found expression in the anti-Tehri demonstrations as opposed to support for the dam.

Insofar as Hindutva ideology was constructed in the two dam movements, it was culturally embedded, taking on forms and meanings specific to Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s social fabric. At the same time, however, the preceding analysis shows parallels between assertions of religious nationalism in the pro-dam and anti-dam movements: the primacy of a hegemonic Hindu identity; forms of othering; and fixations with ‘place’ in identifications with a Hindu nation. These parallels highlight the relational component of the regional modernities
framework. As Doreen Massey (1994) contends, “places are fruitfully conceived as nodal points of connection, linkage, and process rather than as ‘introverted’ sites” (Moore, 2003, p. 199). Nodal connections between Gujarat and Uttarakhand are made visible in the common repository of Hindu nationalist expressions that anti-Tehri and pro-SSP protestors drew from. These overlapping religious nationalist representations, and how they materialized, will be examined in the following sections.

**Interlude: Waterways, Infrastructure, and Flows of Power**

To unpack how pro-SSP and anti-Tehri actors subsumed dams and rivers into Hinduizing narratives, we must first understand such spaces as “mutable” landscapes (Drew, 2018). In other words, they are dynamic, contested sites easily molded by different groups that engage with them, and hence take on a range of meanings reflected within the overarching cultural systems in which they exist (Folch, 2019, p. 7). In particular, ecological spaces offer “symbolic references” (Larsen, 2018, p. 105) through which to produce and formulate distinct social-spatial identities. When infrastructure projects are conceptualized as “arenas of conflictive and communicative actions” (Dwivedi, 2006), they too make manifest the motivations and positions of competing actors.

Central to these claims is the notion that hydroelectric landscapes function as place-making as well as place-disrupting sites (Drew, 2018). For one, waterways such as the Ganga can be described as what Bernhard Forchtner (2020) terms “poetic spaces,” territories that people have interacted with for centuries, and therefore forge enduring connections between past, present, and future generations. In this manner, poetic spaces operate as mediators of belonging, which in turn establishes proximity, access, and rights to these very areas. Poetic spaces, in this sense, are also “political spaces” (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2012, p. 10); that is, control of
such landscapes is intimately tied to the production of power. Dam building can similarly be understood as an exercise in dominion over nature and over politics. Katie Meehan (2013) conceptualizes dams as “wellsprings of power” that not only mirror broader hierarchical systems but can be wielded to entrench forms of social and political discipline. The ability for water networks and infrastructure to demarcate meanings, identities, and boundaries enables these structures to become invested with the creative imaginings of power. It is in this manner that Hindu nationalist elements infiltrated the SSP and Tehri project, and re-situated dam construction debates within the fault lines of Hindu Right politics.

**Polarities of inclusion and exclusion**

Such fault lines emerge through the production of unity and difference. Inclusion and exclusion served as key frames of reference to index support and resistance to the two hydroelectric projects. Representations of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ were propagated through the following interconnected discursive frames: threat and (in)security as well as pride and unity.

**Threat and (In)security**

Dam opponents and proponents strategically exploited perceived threats, and attendant feelings of insecurity, fear, and defense (Sharma, 2009), to claim territory over the dam building sites. In the Tehri movement, anti-dam protestors underlined national threats both within and without. According to the VHP and RSS, the Tehri project could easily be attacked by an “aggressive China, but also by a Muslim Pakistan, a communist Russia, and a conspiring West” (Sharma, 2009). Given that a positive ‘us’ necessitates an equal and opposing hostile ‘them’ (Jalal, 1995), claims of an “aggressive” and “conspiring” enemy sustained constructions of a monolithic Hindu identity. Take this statement by Ashok Singhal, the former VHP president: “I am talking about Gangatva. Gangatva is Hindutva. Hindutva is Rashtratva [nationhood]”
Appeals to nativist sensibilities took on a more frenzied tone among Gujarat’s pro-dam coalition. One Gujarati editorial likened SSP opponents to demons that throw bones in the havan (ritual fire), which denotes desecration and sacrilege in Hinduism. Given that infrastructure-fueled development is core to Gujarati identity, pro-dam actors appraised opposition to the SSP as ‘anti-Gujarat’ (Sangvai, 1994). Medha Patkar, for instance, a prominent social activist from the state of Maharashtra, was denounced as an “outsider plotting against the interests of Gujarat” (Mehta, 2011, p. 50). In light of these divisions, it becomes apparent that Hindutva affiliates within the pro-SSP and anti-Tehri movements did not simply object to whether the dams should be built or not but more broadly to what these actions symbolized: threats to a strong, secure Hindu polity.

In this manner, the narrative interplay between crisis and threat unleashed feelings of deep ontological insecurity (Sharma, 2009). Anthony Gidden theorizes ontological insecurity as existential anxiety that stems from real or imagined ruptures in identity (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016). Representations of threat in the SSP and Tehri dam protests served to create a sense of discontinuity in a dominant Hindu collectivity. As per Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen’s (2016) analysis, to restore stability in the face of perceived threat, individuals gravitate towards “security-seeking” rhetoric and behavior.

The anti-Tehri and pro-SSP demonstrations foregrounded such security-seeking dynamics, which cross cut both movements despite their apparently divergent end goals. First, both dam coalitions drew on the 1990s Ayodhya dispute, an explosive communal event in Hindu-Muslim relations. The dispute took place over the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya city, believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. The mosque, constructed by Mughal
emperor Babur in 1528, was supposedly built over a Hindu temple, a point that continues to be contested in public life. With escalating religious animosities, in 1992 nearly 150,000 karsevaks (holy workers) attacked and demolished the Babri Masjid (The Wire, 2020). During the anti-Tehri demonstrations, one VHP activist declared: “The Tehri dam is being constructed to imprison the Ganga forever...We demolished the Babri mosque. Now we have to get ready to demolish the Tehri dam” (Sharma, 2009). We can see similar invocations of the Ayodhya dispute in the SSP countermovement. The BJP’s rallying cry in Gujarat was “saugandh Narmada ki khatay hain, baandh vahin banayange” (we swear by Narmada, we shall build the dam there), which closely paralleled the slogan “mandir vahin banayenge” (we shall build the temple there) raised during the Ayodhya controversy (Sangvai, 1994).

How do dams come to mirror a mosque? Why did language evoked in the Ayodhya dispute travel to and refigure dam discourse in Uttarakhand and Gujarat? Stanley Tambiah’s (1996) concept of parochalization is of relevance here. Parochalization refers to the process wherein national events percolate to the local level and are reproduced through regional phenomena. The mechanisms of parochalization constitute a type of relational route through which exclusionary religious discourse in the Ayodhya movement was re-enacted in the anti-Tehri and pro-SSP protests. Yatras (rallies) similar to the Ekamta yajna processions enabled the Ayodha cause to emit outwards to other parts of the country (Tambiah, 1996, p. 257). In Uttarakhand, for instance, VHP sadhus (religious ascetics in Hinduism) and pilgrims held a six-day yatra in which they carried holy Ganga water from Haridwar to Delhi (Sharma, 2009). Likewise, in 1990 BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani led a yatra from the Somnath Temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya (Mehta, 2011, p. 53). It is in this manner that religious nationalist verbiage spotlighted in the national Ayodhya dispute became nested within contestations over dam
building in Gujarat and Uttarakhand.

Sanjay Chaturvedi (2000) posits that Hindu nationalist rhetoric underscores power, control, and violence most distinctly through spatial politics. What I highlight here is how those spatial politics are inherently grounded in particular conceptualizations of the natural world as an avatar of the Hindu nation. After all, a primary axis of Hindu nationalism is the preservation of India’s territorial integrity (Varshney, 2013). Religious cleavages in the Ayodhya campaign that were reproduced in the two dam movements can, therefore, be understood as defensive reactions to geographic ontological insecurity, or subjective feelings of threat to territorial markers (e.g., dams, sacred rivers, temples) of the Hindu politic.

To regain certitude in spatially-defined social categories, individuals impose “maps of meaning” (Chaturvedi, 2000, p. 212) onto place. In the SSP and Tehri dam cases, Hindutva protagonists projected a Hindu nationalist imagination onto the contested hydroelectric landscapes, thereby encoding these spaces in the image of a Hindu nation. In doing so, they hardened we/them or Hindu/non-Hindu dichotomies. These discursive practices grew powerfully compelling because individuals derived from them “self-affirming” (Kinnvall, 2018) forms of ontological security that defended against perceived threats to ‘Hindu’ territory and identity linked to the waterways. Such anxious security-seeking responses evaded representations of place that exist outside the Hindutva social conscious, as well as ‘threatening’ actors that embody these alternative maps of meaning. By alternative maps of meaning, I refer to ways of conceptualizing the SSP and Tehri dam landscapes that fell outside hegemonic Hindu readings of space. In demonstrations against the Tehri project, such readings included narratives emphasizing livelihoods, safety, and environmental justice. In the NBA movement, alternative maps of meaning focused on displacement and the social and environmental costs of dam
construction. Notions of security, which Hindu nationalism provides by enforcing rigid ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ categories (Kinnvall, 2018), dominated over and delegitimized these competing environmental narratives.

**Pride and unity**

The securitizing impulses discussed above transpired not only through exclusionary practises but also through articulations of ethno-nationalist and religious unity projected onto waterways and their potential damming. Boundaries of inclusion are established by what Henrik Larsen terms story lines, environmental-political discourses that pivot on a set of unifying symbolic representations. As described previously, prominent story lines in the pro-SSP and anti-Tehri protests revolved around Hindu motifs. These symbolic systems were propelled forward by vocabularies of pride and unity. During the anti-Tehri agitations, for instance, Swami Chidananda Saraswati, a prominent actor in the dam demonstrations, asserted: “India is a holy land and holiest of the holy and greatest of the great is the Himalaya especially its Uttarakhand region...A land of Gods, it is called. It makes its dwellers God-like” (Sharma, 2009). Using the Ganga as a reference point, Saraswati exalted Uttarakhand above other geographies. The spatial metaphors in his description cultivated awe and inspiration. They were “seductive” (Struver, 2004), absorbing and binding citizens under romanticized attachments to place, land, and the water that runs through them.

This collective pride transmutes the Ganga into a landscape icon, a symbolic place that is interwoven into nationalistic discourse. Doing so not only binds citizens into a cohesive whole, it also generates defensive compulsions in service of protecting the Ganga, and by extension, the nation. Laura Hunt (2018) elucidates this point in her analysis of nature and nationalism in Latin America, in which she shows how landscape icons push citizens to “identify with...place, and be
willing to fight to preserve it” (Hunt, 2018). In this manner, evocations of pride in the anti-Tehri protests aimed to create identification with and unity around the Ganga, which ultimately helped elevate resistance to damming the river.

And yet Saraswati’s assimilating spatial strategy paradoxically upheld seemingly unassailable identity distinctions: By projecting India as a holy (read Hindu) nation (Sharma, 2009), he interpellated the Ganga river into imaginings of a Hindu rashtra. Hinduizing story lines installed the river as a “social control district” under Hindu influence (Davis, 1992, as cited in Allen, 1999, p. 196); that is, by constituting the Ganga in the image of a Hindu nation, Hindutva forces exercised their power to regulate how—and more importantly who—engages with the river (Allen, 1999, p. 196).

SSP disputations further underlined the exercise of power through pride in a dominant socio-spatial identity. As Mona Mehta (2011) details, the Gujarati nativist consensus, which Mehta defines as collective Gujarati support for dam building, was a strong countervailing force to the NBA movement. The nativist consensus played out in full force during the 1991 Ferkuwa incident, where disagreements between opponents and proponents of the SSP came to a head. Anti-dam activists who were partaking in the Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra (March for People’s Development) collided with a pro-SSP coalition called Narmada Abhiyaan, who were holding their own rally in support of the dam at Ferkuwa village. In the month-long standoff, the police backed Narmada Abhiyaan obstructed the path of NBA activists. Police violence, arrests, property damage, and destruction of sankalp stambhs (pillars denoting resistance) ensued.

21 In making this point, I do not suggest that only one group of actors exercised power in the SSP and Tehri dam movements; instead, as John Allen contends, there exist multiple modalities and spatial assemblages of power. In Gujarat and Uttarakhand, we observe instrumental power, or power over others, and associational power, or power with others. The latter is evidenced through acts of resistance against social displacement and environmental degradation. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I pay closer attention to how instrumental power in the context of Hindu nationalism played out in the dam case studies.
Gujaratis hailed the blockade as a victory in which “Medha Patkar and her people were shooed away from the state” (Mehta, 2011). The pro-dam movement leveraged the sense of pride from having challenged the NBA activists to build a unified, monolithic ‘we’ around the SSP dam and in opposition to imagined state enemies (Struver, 2004). This aggressive posturing fueled by Gujarati asmita (pride) was combined with expressions of victimhood; that is, dam building advocates conflated resistance to the SSP with hostility towards Gujarati identity. The Gujarat State Cooperative Bank published this statement in Gujarati newspapers: “Oppose those who are coming to break the Narmada project—the lifeline of Gujarat, those who are jealous of Gujarat, and those who are virulently anti-Gujarat” (Mehta, 2011).

By accentuating regional exceptionalism as well as “hurt” (Mehta, 2011) to Gujarati pride, the nativist consensus turned coercive. It spurred the creation of a “developmental other” (Mehta, 2011) -- actors that fail to acquiesce to Gujarat’s growth model, which, as highlighted previously, combines authoritarian development with Hindu fundamentalism (Sud, 2020). When the nativist consensus is contextualized within the divisive movements of the 1980s and 90s, including the Ekamata yajna and Ayodhya dispute, we come to see how solidarity around the SSP imposed spatial modes of instrumental power (Allen, 1999, p. 195): The unity derived from Gujarati asmita exacted allegiance; inclusion was contingent on compliance with the ideals embodied by Gujarat’s development model. Thus, in much the same way as the imposition of Hindu unity in the anti-Tehri protests, the nativist consensus sprung from and reinforced Hindu dominance, while rendering other identities politically marginalized within the social spaces enclosed by the SSP.

In this section, I emphasized overlapping discursive modes in articulating support and
opposition to dam building, including notions of threat and insecurity as well as attendant security-seeking preoccupations with pride and unity. These coinciding registers demonstrate how religious nationalism ‘travels’ across localities, exported through yatras and cross-country processions, media circulations, and interactions between people and groups from different regions. Such circulations reflect relational routes between regions—how discourses are mobile, connecting and compressing the boundaries between regional modernities. Specific to the dam case studies, anti-Tehri and pro-dam protestors ‘translated’ overarching Hinduizing narratives into the dam demonstrations, selectively incorporating, modifying, and reconstructing Hindutva dogmas to serve their specific agendas. The translation process, in which ideological rhetoric is expressed through contextually contingent ways (Lukić, 2019), indicates how even top down, ‘national’ manifestations of religious nationalism assume region-specific forms.

Regional modernities is important to understanding how power plays out in the two dam building discourses. Earlier sections of this chapter discussed how the mutability of hydroelectric landscapes illuminates rivers as political spaces and dams as wellsprings of power. The SSP and Tehri dam disputes revealed deeper conflicts over what dam sites signify. Such tensions effectuated creative imaginings of power. In Gujarat, for example, the SSP functioned as a “power broker” (Meehan, 2013) among competing forces. Pro-dam actors harnessed the dam structure to thwart dissent and assert Gujarati, specifically Hindu, hegemony. Consequently, the dam concretized (Meehan, 2013) broader Hinduizing influences. The spatialization, or localization, of power is evidenced in similar ways in the anti-Tehri movement. By exploiting deep religious links to the Ganga, actors such as the VHP and RSS marked the river as a uniformly Hindu space. In both movements, broader Hindu nationalist forces, while taking on different forms, made manifest strategies of human territoriality, which Robert Sack defines as
the process wherein certain groups “affect, influence or control people, phenomena, and
relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area” (Sack, 1986, p. 19, as
cited in Larsen, 2018, p. 112). Human territoriality in the SSP and Tehri dam movements is
evidenced through boundary-making practises of inclusion and exclusion based on threat,
insecurity, pride, and unity. These mechanisms imposed a hierarchical social order onto the
hydroelectric spaces. The ‘effect’ of this ordering was regulation of not only the actual dam sites,
but also how such places are represented, how they are experienced, and who interacts with
them. In this manner, the SSP and Tehri dam landscapes not only reflected broader power
arrangements but were themselves constitutive of power (Sack, 1983).

**Conclusion**

Space--both built and natural--occupies an important place in Hindu nationalist
imagination. This point is evidenced in Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s dam disputes, which I
investigated using the regional modernities analytic. I first noted the environmental stakes of the
SSP and Tehri dam, and pointed out competing environmental narratives at play in both dam
building movements. I then outlined key regional elements of Gujarat and Uttarakhand’s social
geographies, arguing that Hindu nationalism as an emergent assemblage grew out of sedimented
processes, and was thus mobilized in contradictory ways in the two states. Here is an example of
what I mean by contingency: Articulations of Hindu fundamentalism in the pro-dam and anti-
dam conflicts were inextricably connected to and dependent on the existing socio-political,
historical, and economic contexts of each state.

In the next section, however, I showcased that these divergent Hindutva representations
enacted the same Hinduizing dynamics within the dam debates: compounding religious divides,
inflaming anxieties around national integrity, and consolidating Hindu supremacy. Such patterns
materialized through expressions of threat and security, pride and unity in the pro-dam and anti-dam protests. In the theoretical interlude, I demonstrated that hydroelectric landscapes are amenable to conflicting readings of space. I argued that this mutability allowed for Hindutva rhetoric to infiltrate the dam movements, and render invisible place attachments that exist outside the dominant Hindu imaginary. Because dams and rivers operate as sources of power, they can be wielded to exact political and social discipline. I put forth that it is precisely because right-wing Hindu forces took on region-specific forms that they gained purchase at the local level and were able to infiltrate dam building debates, ultimately transforming hydroelectric landscapes into exclusionary sites of control.

When we examine the green-saffron relationship using the regional modernities lens, we uncover the opposing modes through which Hindu nationalism intersects with nature. In this chapter, I showed that Hindutva proponents engage with nature as an entity to be preserved for national heritage or rendered productive for national growth—both processes cement Hindu dominance, perpetuating the Hindu Right’s broader efforts to assert the reality of a proto-Hindu nation. In the following chapter, I unpack how environmentalists opposed to religious nationalism understand these bottom-up and top-down spatialities of the green-saffron nexus, and how they attempt to navigate as well as resist both.
Introduction

In late 2019, protests erupted in Mumbai following reports of tree felling in Aarey Colony, a densely forested area located in the city. Three years prior, the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Ltd (MMRCL) earmarked more than 33 hectares of forest for clearance to construct a new metro rail project (Srivastava, 2019). Local residents, environmentalists, citizen groups, and students filed petitions demanding Aarey Colony be declared a protected area. Despite sustained public resistance, on October 2019 the Bombay High Court ruled in favor of metro construction. In response, hundreds of citizens and activists organized demonstrations against the destruction of Mumbai’s “green lung” (BBC, 2019).

At the height of opposition, Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist party that shared legislative power with the BJP in the state of Maharashtra, allied with environmentalists on forest preservation. Party workers and prominent figures, including deputy leader Priyanka Chaturvedi, corporator Sheetal Mhatre, and parliament member Gajanan Kirtikar, joined activists on the ground. Party leader Aaditya Thackeray, member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly, was similarly vocal in his objections against the railroad project. In response to bulldozing in the Colony, Thackeray asserted: “How about posting these [municipal corporate] officials in PoK [Pakistan occupied Kashmir], giving them charge to destroy terror camps rather than trees” (Koppikar, 2019)—the statement’s nationalistic undercurrents, a reflection of Shiv Sena’s nativist streak. Even preceding Thakeray’s comments, on August 29th, 2019 all six Shiv Sena representatives on the 18-member tree authority of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) voted against granting approval for the MMRCL project (Thakkar, 2019). Later, the
party filed a writ petition against tree felling in the Bombay High Court (Singh, 2019). By the
time the Supreme Court stepped in, Shiv Sena had firmly inserted itself into the Save Aarey
Forest Movement.

Yet some actors questioned the party’s presence in the protests. Kumar Ketkar, a
distinguished Indian journalist and parliament member of the Rajya Sabha (upper parliamentary
house), said: “[Shiv Sena] will get some mileage out of the protest but that’s all” (Lalwani,
2019). Opposition party members also charged Shiv Sena of “double standards” (Lalwani, 2019)
given its alliance at the time with the BJP-led state government, which ardently supported the
metro proposal. The party was further criticized when party president Uddhav Thackeray met
with former Maharashtrian Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, a vocal project proponent, to
announce their poll pact for the 21 October assembly election but failed to raise the issue of
Aarey Colony (Phadke, 2019).

This friction and sparring over the tree felling and its political uses exemplifies what
Charles Tilly and Lesley Wood label contentious politics. Contentious denotes the conflicting
and divergent set of collective claims that constitute social movements, and politics, how
governments act as “claimants, objects of claims, allies of the objects, or monitors of the
contention” (Tilly & Lesley, 2020, p. 6). This chapter’s analysis stems from the premise that
social movements function as a category of contentious politics. Far from united or consolidated,
social movements coalesce and splinter around “incessant jockeying and realignment” (Tilly &
Lesley, 2020, p. 174); they are textured by internal and external negotiations. I explore such
deliberations within India’s environmental movements. Specifically, I examine how
“progressive” environmentalists wrestle with the implications and opportunities associated with
collaborating with right-wing groups in order to jointly mitigate environmental threats. While
existing literature has interrogated overlapping discursive and organizational formations between green and exclusionary social movements (Bhatia, 2003; Forchtner, 2019; Sharma, 2011), this chapter centers on progressive environmentalists’ personal views, perceptions, and subjectivities of green-saffron alliances.

By shifting from macro to micro structures as the locus of contentious politics, I aim to first complicate Sharma’s observance of a “saffronizing of green” (Sharma, 2011, p. 14) phenomenon, which describes the permeation of Hindu Right elements into Indian ecological movements, as evidenced in the Save Aarey Forest Movement. Through unpacking the participants’ process of working through inner dilemmas surrounding green-saffron alliances, I show that activists committed to inclusive environmentalism are indeed confronting the ways in which exclusionary religious nationalism cuts across the environmental and socio-political challenges concerning their own movements. However, I do not suggest that coalition work between progressively orientated environmental groups and Hindu nationalist actors are untenable. Rather, I demonstrate that for the majority of participants I spoke with, the question of building coalitions with right-wing Hindu affiliates is an ambivalent, unsettling, and equivocal one.

This tension is two-pronged. It arises out of, one, my interviewees’ effortful attempts to “trade places” (Duranti, 2010) with those they ideologically oppose but share common ground with around specific environmental cases. In often surprising and revealing ways, left-leaning environmentalists I interviewed engaged in perspective-taking and meaning-making processes, seeking to theorize the motivations and compulsions of the ‘other’.22 Second, my interlocutors’ struggles with articulating the possibility of green-saffron alliances emanated out of competing

22 Here, I refer to the ‘other’ as actors affiliated with the Hindu Right who share the same environmental values and concerns as that of the progressive environmentalists I interviewed.
personal values and beliefs as well as instrumental considerations and opportunities. In this chapter, I show how the interviewees navigate these multiple positions, vacillating between interpersonal relationships, movement goals and meanings, moral beliefs, and the political realities in which all three are situated. I discuss how the environmental activists I was in conversation with attempt to reconcile contradictory stances on green-saffron alliances, and do so in empathic, creative, and pragmatic ways, even when they are unable to fully resolve such tensions or reach a definitive conclusion.

This chapter will proceed as follows. I will explore the profiles of three environmentalists: Aaron, Kumar, and Priya. Their views represent the dominant positions yielded by my interviews. All three participants were critical of Hindutva ideology broadly and the Hindu Right’s environmental engagement specifically, but they arrived at distinct conclusions on the question of green-saffron alliances. In the first section, I will explore Aaron’s moral dilemmas associated with collaborating with the Hindu Right, paying close attention to how movement meanings and personal ethic systems work in tandem to inform perceptions of good politics. In the next section, I will examine coalition formations within intersubjective spaces, and demonstrate how Kumar comprehends an individual’s ‘full self’ as well as their ideological affinities, and his attempts to square the two. Finally, I will analyze Priya’s instrumental considerations regarding cooperative engagements with right-wing Hindu groups. Here, I will use the collaborative adversarial framework to analyze how environmentalists calculate the opportunities and costs of green-saffron coalitions, what prompts such negotiations, and how activists navigate these often sticky, strange relations between progressive environmentalists and right-leaning Hindu actors.

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23 I completed twenty semi-structured interviews, but for the purposes of this chapter I have chosen to conduct an in-depth analysis of three participants’ responses.
Aaron: Good Politics, Meanings, and Morality

Among the environmentalists I interviewed for this project, Aaron is perhaps the most resolute in his resistance to forging connections with Hindu Right actors. An activist and scholar in the development sector, Aaron’s public advocacy focuses on water governance, management and conflict. He was first introduced to this work while participating in the Mukti Sangharsh movement, a mass mobilization movement in rural Maharashtra centered on rural employment and drought eradication (Desai, 2019). Informed by this work and his later involvement in participatory irrigation management schemes and anti-dam struggles, Aaron’s environmental engagement is animated by the principles of equity, justice, transparency, and accountability.

Accordingly, he contends that the totalitarianism of Hindutva is antithetical to what should be the core normative frameworks of environmental movements. He recounted one instance that foregrounded his position on the ‘right’ environmental ethics. In 2008, there was local uproar in the town of Chakan following the announcement of a Dow Chemical Co. Research and Development Center on the banks of Indrayani River, a sacred river for Hindus in Maharashtra (Ghoge, 2010). Opposition to the project due to concerns over water pollution and lack of public consultation encompassed a broad array of actors, including community members, religious organizations, the local RSS chapter, and environmental activists. RSS leadership formally contacted participating environmental networks, including the Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM), which Aaron is a founding member of, to form a united front against development of the industrial plant. When internal organizational discussions about sharing a platform with the RSS ensued, Aaron “put [his] foot down,” declaring that Hinduizing forces were a “poison” as bad as the chemical plant.
Aaron’s objections to a combined strategy with the RSS challenge Sharma’s notion of a green-saffron nexus. His resistance to collaboration supports the argument that barriers to bridging processes for cross-movement coalitions are higher than for within-movement coalitions, and thus the preconditions needed to overcome them, even more exceptional (Beamish & Luebbers, 2009). In the case of the Dow industrial project, the primary hurdle to partnership was differing ideological orientations. Existing social movement research shows that ideological incongruity between organizations precludes social ties among activists within these groups (Dyke & McComman, 2010, p. xviii). In the Indrayani River case, such ideological polarities are revealed in Aaron’s aversion to the Hindu Right’s environmental politics, specifically to: how the ‘natures’ articulated by Hindu nationalists exclude Muslim and Dalit environmental subjectivities; how the ruling political establishment squashes dissent, keeping a strong chokehold on public backlash; and how the BJP’s “systematic forked tongue speech” (Kaul, 2017), which appeals to multiple constituencies and renders divergent demands uniform, insulates the party from electoral loss.

For Aaron, the Sangh Parivar’s “larger politics” matters. As Brockett (1991) explains, activists’ perceptions of the existing political climate influence mobilizing potential and collective action. When social environments undergo profound transformation, environmentalists’ appraisal of this reordering can give rise to new alliances and bring changes anew to existing partnerships (Borland, 2010, p. 259), thereby creating shifting boundary definitions—delineations between those within and outside activist networks (Diani & Bison, 2004). Specific to the Indrayani River dispute, Aaron’s evaluation of burgeoning Hindu fundamentalism as “poison” induced social distance between him and RSS players involved in the local resource struggle. Despite overlapping environmental concerns, value systems came
into play in marking boundary definitions. Here, Aaron’s emphasis on maintaining a strong social equality ethos epitomizes the concept of good politics, or activists’ calculations of not just the strategic value but also the ideological merit of coalition formation. According to this constructionist point of view, the possibility of alliance building recedes when coalition efforts fail to align with perceptions of good politics. To quote Benita Roth (2010): “Good politics is not only what is potentially most effective; good politics is a matter of what actions are most congruent with established meanings in activist communities around identities and ethics” (Roth, 2010, p. 99-113).

Established meanings stem from prevailing movement cultures, discourses, and collective identities (Witthier, 2002, p. 292). Dominant meanings among the progressive environmentalists I interviewed, for instance, draw on collective framings related to radical ecological democracy, alternative developmental pathways, livelihood crises, and movements such as Narmada and Chipko. When considering India’s most urgent environmental challenges, Aaron emphasized the need for transformative paradigms that center on “living with” rather than “taming” nature, and further foreground the struggles of “toiling classes, downtrodden, and demarginalized sections” of society. According to Aaron, this environmental justice axis, with its roots in Marxist worldviews, deviates from “elite” strands of Indian environmentalism. Environmentalists who align with such currents “get the environment right and politics wrong--” they neither consider how environmental problems map onto social inequities, nor do they take cognizance of the broader ideological stances of their coalition partners, which paves the way for organizational ties between environmental and Hindu fundamentalist groups. This critique of green-saffron alliances emanates from Aaron’s own position within the environmental justice movement, from narratives anchored in justice, equity, and inclusion that are fashioned out of movement histories
grounded in an “environmentalism of the poor” (Guha, 2013). Aaron, whose activism is motivated by enduring connections to and the grievances of marginalized groups, functions within the parameters and values proclaimed by the social and environmental justice movements he belongs to; his actions and thinking are organized around the repertoire of actions and environmental justice collective frames that impute these movement’s internal identities.

Movement culture is further sharpened by dialectic interactions between movement actors and external state processes (Meyer, 2002, p. 5). Through emergent forms of resistance, movements take on oppositional meanings; that is, beliefs that counter the broader political fields in which they are located (Whittier, 2002, p. 301). Specific to the current discussion, Aaron views environmental injustice as inextricably bound up in the BJP’s broader technocratic Hindutva governance, which itself is predicated on the state’s neoliberal logics. In our conversations, Aaron discussed the proposed interlinking rivers project, for instance, which ostensibly tackles drought and flooding in the region. The massive undertaking to connect the country’s 30 major rivers not only requires $130 billion in private investment, water experts have further pointed out that the scheme could lead to waterlogging, damage fisheries, impede transportation of silt, and inundate surrounding forest areas (Chaudhary, 2014). Projections additionally predict that the project will dispossess nearly 5.5 million people, primarily in India’s Adivasi Belt (Bandyopadhyay & Perveen, 2003).

Aaron asserted that the BJP administration sought to bulldoze the river interlinking scheme under the banner of “one market, one nation…one river, one nation.” The nationalistic prism through which the BJP recasts infrastructure planning is set against the backdrop of ease of doing business--environmental deregulation policies that seek to attract corporate activity and spending. Increasingly, infrastructure planning and environmental governance get ensnared in
interconnected neoliberal and Hindu nationalist diktats. In this way, Aaron’s diagnostic framing identifies the Hindu Right’s political machinations as a central factor underlying both intensified ecological destruction and the elimination of marginalized communities from environmental and socio-political consciousness. Partnerships with Hindutva adherents, therefore, compromise the credibility of liberatory environmental framings (Guha, 2013) and the actors that seek to uphold them (Benford & Snow, 2000). Attempts to integrate the two threaten the environmental justice movement’s “ideological purity” McCallion & Maines, 1999; Benford, 1993a, as cited in Benford & Snow, 2000). The irreconcilability between joint action with Hindu Right actors and the rejection of Hindu nationalism on ideological and political grounds explains Aaron’s inability to consider brokering alliances with the RSS (Smith & Bandy, 2005, p. 10).

In addition to the influence of macro interactions between movement identities and external structures, movement participants configure meanings within progressive environmental circles according to their own consciousness (Whittier, 2002, p. 292). Because activists are instrumental as well as moral actors, their actions do not always align with a “rational calculator” (Meyer, 2002, p. 13). Returning to the Indrayani River controversy, for instance, Aaron foreclosed the possibility of green-saffron coalition building despite the fact that joining forces with the RSS may have resulted in a more unified, coherent resistance campaign; this complicates the assumption that activists will engage in cooperative planning when doing so helps actualize shared goals (Gamson 1961; McCarthy & Zald, 1977, as cited in Beamish & Luebbers, 2009). Indeed, the trajectories of movement pathways contract and expand around

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24 Project construction discontinued in 2008 following local residents’ attempts to demolish the structure. The Maharashtrian state subsequently instituted a panel to oversee an environmental impact assessment of the plant, which was later submitted to the Bombay High Court. In 2010, Dow Chemicals surrendered 100 acres of land to the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) (Ghoge, 2010). The focus of this chapter, however, is less on campaign outcomes and more on internal decision-making processes within movements, as well as perceptions of a movement’s effectiveness among individual actors.
“self-imposed moral commitments” (Meyer, 2002, p. 13). In Aaron’s situation, having worked alongside and with people’s movements for more than three decades (Desai, 2019), his environmentalism is deeply embedded within the social, economic, and environmental hardships of the working class. Such resource struggles, heightened under the current administration’s ‘race to the bottom’ policies, infuse moral urgency in Aaron’s environmentalism. His political differences with the saffron brigade are thus not simply ideological but ethical (Hatemi, Crabtree, & Smith, 2019). He expressed frustration, for example, over environmentalists’ refrain from voicing discontent with Hinduizing elements in the environmental domain due to fear of “hurting [religious] sentiments.” This silence, he contended, causes “progressive movements [to] play into the hands of [Hindutva] forces.”

In Aaron’s view, virtue systems and environmentalism are enmeshed spheres. Nancy Schepers-Hughes (1995) and Paul Farmer (1992, 1999) echo this perspective in their thesis, which states that morality, or “forms of compassion, empathy, and care,” serves as a counterpoise to oppressive systems. In this regard, moral imperatives are fundamentally tethered to the political domain (Mattingly & Throop, 2018). When environmentalism is interpreted as a response to environmentally and socially degrading political conditions, one that flows from the impulse to “change society” (Desai, 2019) for the better, we come to understand Aaron’s reflexive right/wrong judgments to green-saffron alliances. For Aaron, a unified strategy with Hindutva protagonists is an endorsement of Hindutva politics, an affirmation of an unequal social order. Green-saffron coalition activity hence not only thwarts core movement ideals, it conflicts with a personal code of ethics, stemming from lived experience and political commitments, that fuels a desire for social transformation, and further lends impetus and direction for environmental action.
That is not to say that all my interlocutors remain steadfast in their moral maxims. Rather, their reflections and hesitations reveal an uncertainty about right and wrong in the context of green-saffron alliances. Indeed, as Anand Pandian (2009) shows, virtues are cultivated, iterated, and subject to countervailing forces. This messiness is particularly evident when environmental activists engage in “scale jumping” (Fitz-Henry, 2011) between macro and micro levels of social movements. How progressive environmentalists navigate their moral apprehensions within the latter space is the focus of the following section.

**Kumar: “We all have our internal contradictions and inconsistencies”**

Within movements, network expansion occurs at two overlapping levels. The first is the organizational level, which includes resource sharing, collaborative activities, and links between staff and board of trustee members within different groups. The second is the individual level, which entails connections between individual organization affiliates (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992). When asked about green-saffron confluences, Kumar’s responses centered primarily on collaborative interactions at the individual level. As co-founder of Kalpavriksh, the nation’s foremost sustainability and social equity organization, Kumar said he has witnessed growing communalizing influences in the environmental sector. He pointed to notable examples, such as, the involvement of the Hindu fundamentalist farmer’s union Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in the anti-Monsanto campaign.25 Similar to Aaron’s opinions, Kumar underscored that while such groups may have “good intentions,” their broader politics are “completely opposite” to that of Kalpavriksh.

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25 BKS mounted a resistance campaign alongside thousands of farmers against Monsanto and the introduction of new GMO crops in India. These protests were sparked by intensifying farmer stress, high GMO cotton seed prices, corporate exploitation, lack of national self-reliance, and increasing privatization. See Bhardwaj, Jain, & Lasseter (2017) for more information about BKS’s role in the ‘Monsanto Quit India’ campaign.
Yet, unlike Aaron, Kumar did consider the possibility of collaborative environmental action with *individuals* who espouse right-wing Hindu sentiments. He differentiated between “dangerous” religious nationalism and actors “swayed” by Hindutva dogmas; these are people who, as per Kumar’s opinion, may “not have thought of the implications” of their beliefs. In this manner, Kumar alludes to Hindu radicalization as an almost passive process, seeking to deflect blame from the ‘other,’ redirecting attention away from individual actors to the ideologies they embody. With this splitting, Kumar’s perception of right-wing actors becomes less overwhelmed by his diametric opposition to Hindu nationalist politics.

This distancing and reorienting occurs within the intersubjective space between self and other. Eugene Matusov (1996) conceptualizes intersubjectivity “as a process of coordination of individual participation in joint sociocultural activity” (Matusov, 1996, p. 26). In order for joint action to ensue, it is necessary for participants to realize the complex and multifaceted truths they and others possess. Without this standpoint of intersubjectivity, it is hard to see how any joint action, including environmental coalition building, can develop or be sustained (Fowlkes, 1997).

Matusov disaggregates the intersubjective process into three sequential components: a common background between participants, mutual understanding and engagement, and joint action. In the context of our current discussion, Kumar pointed to overlapping positions—a common background—between environmentalists and Hindu right-leaning actors on localization, anti-globalization, and the revitalization of tradition. Motivations and language differ: Environmentalists like Kumar decry the ecological and social costs of Western-based, extractive models of development, while the saffron brigade’s stance stems primarily from protectionist compulsions and Hindu autochthonous thinking. However, there are common catalysts for both agendas: economic liberalization, increased privatization, growing inequality.
By this regard, even diametrically opposed movements may at times have common ground. Indeed, in his analysis of U.S. small-farmer politics, Brian Stock (1996) demonstrates how far-right and liberal movements can at times function as outgrowths of the same historical grievances (Edelman, 2001). In response to the 1980s farm crisis, some American farmers gravitated towards right-wing populism and others to movements shaped by environmentalism, objections to unrestrained free trade, and feminism (Mooney & Majka 1995, as cited in Edelman, 2001). As Stock articulated: “The roots of violence, racism, and hatred can be and have been nourished in the same soil and from the same experiences that generated rural movements for democracy and equality.”

Commonalities between progressive environmentalists and the Hindu Right are brought to the fore in the intersubjective space. Through attempting to decode the intentions of right-wing activists (Cortina & Liotti, 2010), Kumar becomes cognizant of shared environmental anxieties with ideological opponents, which then forms the basis for his belief in the possibility of mutual understanding and engagement (Matusov, 1996). This recognition is integral to sharing and cooperation across ideological divides (Cortina & Liotti, 2010). With acceptance of “a mutually shared world” (Matusov, 1996), the possibility of collaborative planning opens, and the final component of the intersubjective process, joint action, is realized.

To be sure though, the prospect of cooperative engagement with Hindu Right players is still an uncertain one for Kumar. That is to say, a common background around environmental concern and the mutual understanding that is derived from it do not presuppose coalition formation. And intersubjectivity itself does not always entail agreement. Indeed, Matusov details patterns of “jumping and drifting” away from participants and their ideas within intersubjective relations. Such re-calibrations and re-examinations are evident in Kumar’s contradictory stances
on allying with Hindu nationalist adherents. Take this example: In 2017, anti-pesticide discussions swept the state of Maharashtra. Kalpavriksh participated in this movement, and so did the Maharashtrian chapter of Swadeshi Jagran Manch, a Hindu Right affiliated organization. As with the Indrayani River case, there was considerable internal deliberation around the possibility of joining forces with the right-wing Hindu organization. Kumar eventually decided against aligning with Swadeshi Jagran Manch, however, stating that in the current socio-political moment the “Hindu right is completely out of control and doing all kinds of horrible stuff.”

Yet Kumar has previously shared a platform with members of Hindu nationalist outfits, for example, on the issue of Indigenous rights within Adivasi communities, in which the saffron brigade has sought to infiltrate and bring into the Hindu fold. Sometimes this coalition move is a tactical one, as will be explored in the next section. Other times, however, it stems from a desire to avoid totalizing perspectives of “different others” (Fowlkes, 1997): In our conversations, Kumar stated that “we all have our internal contradictions and inconsistencies.” It is possible, for example, that a person supports both progressive green causes as well as reactionary nationalist agendas. In tolerating this ambivalence, Kumar practices the ideal of enlarged mentality, which Hannah Ardent explicates as a type of perspective taking that leads to better informed judgments (Lyshaug, 2006). It is through this representative thinking (Feldman, 1999) that Kumar’s dilemma around green-saffron coalitions emerges: How do you disassociate from and resist an actor’s potentially “dangerous” politics but simultaneously accommodate for their plurality, and how do you do so without seemingly propping up or evading an individual subject’s support, direct or indirect, for exclusionary systems and beliefs?

Kumar’s attempts to grapple with these conflicting impulses showcase a readiness to “speak with and to others, while staying mindful that no one position is privileged in being able
to provide full knowledge of reality, however constructed” (Fowlkes, 1997). His receptivity is highlighted in this statement: “Through open dialogue we can accept mistakes in the things we are seeing.” This openness to change in oneself and others, what Brenda Lyshaug (2006) calls an ethic for enlarged sympathy, creates the creative space necessary to cultivate connections with others without effacing political difference. Doing so might help unite diverse constituencies, foster negotiations, facilitate communicative action, build and expand movements, and ultimately realize collective environmental action goals (Fowlkes, 1997).

Nevertheless, cooperative interactions with Hindu nationalist adherents, if they form at all, are fraught and fragmented. Within intersubjective spaces, individuals confront a different other’s ideological affinities but also their particularities and complexities. As environmentalists attempt to straddle the two, their positions on coalition building with the Hindu Right shift, evolve, and at times generate multiple incompatible judgments (Feldman, 1999). Decision making on green-saffron alliances, therefore, is rarely as consistent, firm, or unyielding as one might expect from progressive environmentalists’ who oppose the Hindu Right’s environmental engagement and Hindutva ideology more broadly.

**Priya: Collaborative Adversarial Relationships**

Beyond tensions that arise within intersubjective relations, left-leaning environmentalists like Priya, a wildlife and conservationist specialist at Kalpavriksh, are also forced to consider the practical dimensions of coalition building: efficacious movement tactics, environmental goals, and external structures. As with Aaron and Kumar, Priya denounces Hindu nationalist environmental politics, asserting that the Hindu Right reduces nature to a mere political formulation. Nonetheless, she stated that throughout her professional career she has had interactions with members of the RSS and Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, a Sangh Parivar
organization whose mission is to advance *ghar whapsi* (“coming home,” or conversions into Hinduism) and *seva* (service) in Adivasi communities. Despite the fact that coordinated activity with right-wing Hindu organizations is ad-hoc, delimited, and often “uncomfortable on both ends,” Priya underscored that “in any movement, you can’t completely cut off people, you have to keep gates open for negotiation.”

Priya’s standpoint on cooperative strategies is in part predicated on instrumental factors. As Thomas Beamish and Amy Luebbers (2009) highlight, unlikely alliances are motivated by an attitude of realpolitik; that is, pragmatic assessments of a group’s restrictions, needs, and demands, and how they may be addressed through joint action. By this stance, decisions to engage with right-wing actors emerge out of “brute necessity” (Lyshaug, 2006). Here, Nancy Whittier’s (2014) term collaborative adversarial relationship is of relevance. Whittier describes collaborative adversarial movements as clandestine and partial coordination among ideologically incongruent groups along a limited set of shared goals, although these aims themselves may be pursued for divergent reasons. Similarly, consensus coalition processes capture coalition bonds between networks that do not share strong identity links but nevertheless mobilize in order to pool resources and produce collective goods. Once collective action goals are achieved, solidarity ties between collaborative adversarial partners dissolve, as neither instrumental bonds nor collective movement framings conjoin the two parties.

Given that progressive environmentalists resist, oppose, and question the Hindutva brigade’s credibility, continued partnerships with right-wing Hindu groups risk intergroup and intragroup conflict, reputational costs, and factionalization. To avoid these costs, cross-movement actors employ distancing strategies (Whittier, 2014). One such tactic Priya discussed was covert consultations, wherein Hindu right affiliates send environment related memorandum
and proposals to Kalpavriksh members, who then return them with comments but do not take credit or seek association with those remarks. These strategic maneuvers blur boundary definitions. While definitional closure, or determinations of movement membership (Lyshaug, 2006), is clearly marked, movement spillover and interactions do materialize in more subterranean ways to enable concerted efforts towards a common end goal. In this way, boundary definitions are shifting in nature. They are contingent, not always explicitly demarcated, and continuously drawn and redrawn as organizational needs and circumstances change and evolve.

The main pragmatic needs of environmental groups that Priya outlined can be grouped into two categories: opportunities and/or threats. Here, I use the term opportunity to mean the increased probability that movement action will yield desired outcomes (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001). Threat, on the other hand, refers to environmental (Almedia, 2019) and socio-political challenges that catalyze mobilization. Social movement scholars highlight opportunities and threats, or interactions between the two, as core precipitating factors in coalition work (Staggenborg, 1986).

Regarding opportunities, Priya first explained how the ruling BJP political establishment’s aversion to feedback loops from civil society has rendered it challenging to stimulate dialogue with government functionaries. Hence, some activists have sought negotiations with the RSS, which shares close ties with the BJP, as a means to pave communication inroads with the current administration. Greater proximity to the RSS is perceived as an opportunity to elevate environmental concerns in governance. This tactic exploits society’s multiple centers of power (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018, as cited in Almeida, 2019): When progressive environmentalists encounter hostility from BJP leaders, they may
approach ancillary centers of Hindu nationalist power (e.g., the RSS) and leverage connections with powerful grassroots right-wing Hindu organizations in order to provoke negotiations at the decision making level. Weighing these benefits higher than the costs associated with engaging the RSS—reputational risks, moral discomfort, and ideological conflict—progressive environmentalists may be compelled to forge relations with Hindutva proponents.

This coalition building calculus is propelled by external threats. For one, Priya lamented the escalating environmental crises that plague the country: pollution, commodification of nature, forest clearances. Social movement scholars emphasize that external threats with high visibility, credibility, and widespread effects are more likely to spur cooperative activism (Einwohner & Maher, 2011; Zepeda-Millán, 2017, as cited in Almeida, 2019, p. 57). Intensified environmental degradation, in this way, may be severe enough to activate bridge-building dynamics with ideological opponents who share the same environmental concerns (Dyke & McCammon, 2010). Indeed, Priya noted that Kalpavriksh has organized consultations with Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram over changes to wildlife and forest protection acts, which is something they “would have hesitated to do before.”

Such reassessments of green-saffron alliances are similarly motivated by negative social conditions. As described earlier, Priya believes the political climate under the BJP critically curtails environmental resistance. Crackdowns on civil disobedience by blocking organizational websites, charging activists with the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), and wielding state violence against protestors indicate an erosion of rights. Government clampdowns on environmental resistance have exacerbated under the BJP regime, Priya underscored. As per the bad-news threat model, collective mobilization is more likely to take place when an established and codified set of rights is undermined (Almeida, 2010, p. 53). Having become
accustomed to conditions more conducive to environmental resistance in the past, the decline of such opportunities is felt more acutely in the present, prompting environmentalists to re-evaluate repertoires of action. What Priya’s comments capture then is the interaction between opportunity and threat: The increasingly repressive social environment under BJP rule constrains activism, pushing environmental groups to creatively redefine organizational stratagems, identify new avenues of political action, and recognize “common place” with different others in order to gain movement traction outside of more confrontational modes of protest, thereby revealing the opportunity dimensions of repression and threat (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001, p. 195).

Yet, as Benita Roth (2010) contends, for coalition work to transpire, “activists have to perceive cooperation itself as useful; it is not enough just to perceive an external threat” (Borland, 2010, p. 259). In the Indrayani River case, for instance, social and environmental threats did not portend solidarity ties between SOPPECOM and the RSS; this is because Aaron views religious fanaticism as a threat of equal scale to that of the Dow industrial project. The importance of framing in coalition propensities is underlined here (Croteau & Hicks, 2003). Because opportunities and threats are socially constructed, they are subject to varied interpretations. While movement identities and meanings mediate subjective understandings of opportunity and threat (Koopmans & Duyvendak, 1995), perceptions of the two differ based on individual frameworks (Croteau & Hicks, 2003).

Priya and Aaron, for instance, are guided by organizational framings that foreground environmental justice, but the two participants propound different costs-benefit assessments of coalition participation with the Hindu Right. Priya adopts a pragmatic view, stating that links with RSS members serve as conduits for negotiation, dialogue, and information-exchange. From this perspective, building partnerships with right-wing Hindu actors, even if covert and
temporary, is an “uncomfortable” but necessary step for social movement success. In contrast, Aaron asserted that any alignment with Hindutva adherents has moral implications. Commitments to environmental protection and Hindu nationalism cannot be reconciled; holding on to moral foundations takes precedence, he argued. Given that Hindutva is antipodal to principles of equity, inclusion, and justice, Aaron views coalitions with the saffron brigade as morally deplorable. What we see, in this way, are tensions between practical needs and ethical systems, between movement processes and outcomes. Environmental activists navigate these competing interests by drawing on organizational and individual frameworks. As they deliberate the effectiveness of coalition building (Croteau & Hicks, 2003), their perspectives oscillate, as well as converge and clash with other movement actors, creating the “swirling dynamic patterns” (Goldstone & Tilly, 2010) that constitute contentious politics.

**Conclusion**

With heightened environmental degradation, climate change, and natural resource conflicts, some theorists have predicted growing environmental participation from the Hindu Right wing (Rao, 2011). This chapter has illustrated progressive environmental activists’ perceptions of such convergences between green and saffron. I began by stating that environmental movements are a category of contentious politics. They are characterized by claim making, contentious performances (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006), and conflictive negotiations. In this chapter, I focused on how my interlocutors’ claims about the Hindu Right’s environmental engagement are brought into contention.

In the first section, I analyzed Aaron’s opposition to cooperation with right-wing Hindu actors. I argued that interpretation of good politics, mediated by environmental justice framings and individual moral codes, prevented Aaron from imagining the possibility of green-saffron
alliances. In his opinion, Hindu nationalism is the antithesis of core environmental justice commitments. Collaboration with right-leaning actors would thus generate insurmountable moral inconsistencies.

In contrast, Kumar took on a more ambivalent position. He, like Aaron, is fundamentally averse to saffronizing politics. However, Kumar demonstrated more uncertainty about coalition building with individuals who champion progressive green causes but also take on Hinduizing positions. This hesitancy arose from moving between macro and micro scales, comprehending overarching Hindu nationalist ideology and the views of individual Hindu Right actors, and attempting to compartmentalize the two. It emerged also from effortful attempts to comprehend ideological opponents as complex, contradictory actors. In doing so, shared interests come to light, opening up the possibility of mutual engagement—a prerequisite for joint environmental action. Yet I underlined that this perspective-taking does not guarantee cooperative activity. As Kumar alternates between an individual’s exclusionary ideology, their humanity, and common environmental concerns, he shifts in his decision-making regarding green-saffron alliances, sometimes moving towards and other times distancing from such coalition bonds.

This contingency is further highlighted in the final section, in which I explored Priya’s responses to forging ties with right-wing Hindu actors. Her deliberations incorporated the pragmatic needs and demands of environmental movements. Using the collaborative adversarial relationship lens, I elucidated opportunity and threat factors that prompt ideologically opposed organizations to temporarily overcome differences in order to achieve shared environmental goals. Moreover, I described the creative tactics used to sustain these relations in the face of reputational risks, moral discomfort, and ideological conflict. I discussed how Priya’s maneuvering around green-saffron alliances is driven by weighing external circumstances,
right/wrong judgements, and the perceived effectiveness of coalition ties. Such cost-benefit assessments are sticky and uneasy, shifting in nature, and subject to different interpretations.

From this analysis, it becomes clear that collaboration and/or opposition to Hindutva affiliates’ environmental participation can be rendered uncertain when engaging with scales and contingency. These frameworks can reveal the heterogeneity of the green-saffron relationship, as well as multiple points where it should be resisted. Yet contingency and scale may also give rise to competing questions and motivations that environmental activists have to wrestle with. In doing so, they may arrive at different stances on the green-saffron nexus, which may influence decisions around coalition building, and ultimately the trajectory and outcomes of environmental action. What comes to light is the stuff of contentious environmentalist politics: Shifting positions, episodic interactions, and evolving relations between claimants (e.g., progressive environmentalist), mediators (e.g., individual right-wing Hindu actors), and subjects of claims (e.g., BJP).
Chapter (Five): Conclusion

In 2019, India’s national election rallies coincided with Kumbh Mela, a religious festival that takes place every twelve years in which millions of Hindu devotees travel to the city of Prayagraj to take a ‘holy dip’ in the Ganga River. Signs plastered with Prime Minister Modi’s face lined the pilgrimage route. Billboards and video screens blared, broadcasting the BJP’s accomplishments. Months prior, Hindutva leader Yogi Adityanath announced a cleanup of the river in preparation for the festival. He blamed the tannery business, an industry made up predominantly of Muslims and lower-caste Hindus, for pollution in the Ganga. Consequently, he decreed the tanneries be closed for three months, effectively causing millions of people to lose employment. Taj Alam, vice president of the Uttar Pradesh Leather Industry Association, lamented: “This is done purposely just to hurt one segment of society, the Muslim community” (Gettleman & Kumar, 2019). During Kumbh Mela, political imagery, religiosity, and Hindu nationalism intersected powerfully, dangerously. At the center of these convergences lay the Ganga River; nature itself came to the fore.

I began this thesis by contending that nature plays a prominent role in national assemblages. I put forward John Hulgren’s (2015) argument that visions of nature as a pure, timeless creation have epistemological import for constructions of the nation. For one, the relationship between nation and nature highlights the human desire for rootedness. In Simone Weil’s (1943) words:

“Just as there are certain culture beds for certain microscopic animals, certain types of soil for certain plants, so there is a certain part of the soul in everyone and certain ways of thought and action communicated from one person to another which can only exist in a national setting, and disappear when a country is destroyed” (p. 163).
In this regard, belonging to national communities (Viroli, 1995, p. 165-173), however imagined as these entities are (Anderson, 1983), matters. Identification with places occupied by such communities also matters. When these places encompass nature—that is, nature as a seemingly enduring and unchanging representation—attachments to nature come to symbolize sustained attachments to the nation. As such, local struggles to protect ‘nationalized’ natures matter.

Increasingly, however, nature is transforming into a “site of discursive struggle” (Hultgren, 2015, p. 174) for oppressive, exclusionary types of nationalism. By naturalizing certain commitments to nationhood, primordial nationalism treats national identity and national borders as preordained destiny. Primordial forms of nationalism claim that certain groups within the nation are more organically rooted in the national soil than others. Critically, then, questions of ‘whose nation’ and ‘whose nature’ emerge.

This thesis examined such questions in the context of Hindu nationalism and its relation to nature and nature protection, i.e., the green-saffron nexus. I aimed to complicate the green-saffron nexus by attending to its scalar dimensions, and in doing so, showcased its multiple trajectories and materialities. How saffron politics intersect with nature is contingent, dynamic, and bound up in contextual factors at different scales. Yet I argued that even these seemingly disconnected spatialities of the green-saffron nexus propel the Hindutva machine forward. In Chapter Two, for instance, I illuminated the landscape of cow protection, demonstrating its shockingly cruel as well as ordinary, intimate manifestations. Both forms are mutually constitutive, connected by and enabling violence against marginalized communities.

I then transitioned from considering the green-saffron nexus at individual/national scales to between different regional modernities. Here, I presented the SSP and Tehri dam debates, underscoring that Hindutva representations were mobilized in paradoxical ways in each conflict
because they emerged out of distinct social-political, historic, and environmental conditions. Such patterns highlight the contingent nature of the relationship between Hinduizing forces and the preservation, management, and exploitation of nature. Due to nodal points of connections between regional modernities, however, pro-SSP and anti-Tehri actors propagated the same set of Hinduizing dynamics. Both dam coalitions interpolated spatially defined constructions of a Hindu rashtra into imaginaries of hydroelectric landscapes. In doing so, they subsumed dams and rivers under the exclusionary control of dominant Hindu groups.

In Chapter Four, I untangled progressive environmentalists’ positions on these relations between Hindu nationalism, nature, and environmentalism, and further explored their perceptions of green-saffron alliances. I indicated that my interlocutors’ theorization of the Hindu Right’s environmental participation underlined their critical engagement with scale and contingency. I suggested that in adopting these frameworks the activists I spoke to are positioned to more effectively oppose Hindutva-driven ecological nationalism because they recognize the heterogeneity of the phenomenon. But resistance becomes increasingly more challenging as activists themselves practice scale jumping. They oscillate between micro and macro scales of contentious environmental politics, engaging with personal moral imperatives, intersubjective coalition spaces, established environmental justice framings, and movement goals. While my participants never fully reconcile these competing impulses, they attempt to do so, often in creative, pragmatic, and empathic ways.

Looking Forward

This thesis has primarily looked at scalarity in the national realm. One spatial dimension it has not tackled is the global scale. Situating the green-saffron nexus within global processes could be a direction for future research. Below, I briefly describe examples of interlinkages
between right-wing movements and green thinking outside of India in order to shed light on crosscutting themes across regions.

Beyond the Indian context, there is a limited but growing body of work on the relation between far-right ideology and environmental thought (Brüggemeier, Cioc, & Zeller, 2005; Hultgren, 2015). In Nazi Germany, for instance, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) enshrined associations between national identity and the lived environment into the 1935 Nature Protection Law (RNG), a landmark piece of legislation that at the time was the most ambitious conservation law in the industrialized world. The law coupled homeland protection and environmental protection; it simultaneously sought to revitalize German traditions, legitimize the concept of a strong Volk (pure “common German”), and inspire environmental stewardship. Myth, nativism, and ethno-political commitments to nature coalesced to buttress conservation as well as nation-building efforts.

The Third Reich’s green agenda was, however, called into question when the party’s leaders prioritized war preparation over conservation policies during World War II. As war efforts intensified, Nazi officials scaled up deforestation to bolster autarky and rearmament. Hitler’s overarching military-industrial vision for the nation necessitated unfettered timber extraction and natural resource exploitation (Brüggemeier, Cioc, & Zeller 2005, p. 6-9). As with the Hindu Right’s environmental engagement, the Third Reich’s approach to conservation was contingent, shaped and molded by broader political agendas and socio-political transformations.

The environmental stances of other European right-wing parties similarly expose patterns of contingency. In the wake of World War I, the UK’s ultra-right viewed cultural and environmental degradation as products of accelerating urbanization and industrialization. Right-wing groups viewed attachments to a romanticized countryside and aestheticized rural landscape
as a means to provide renewed vitality to the nation. Nature, in this sense, served as a space where national identity was performed and national history remembered. Moreover, fear of national decline transpired within broader concerns of the threat the free market posed to rural economies. A self-sufficient, agrarian economy was hence seen as integral to the nation’s reinvigoration (Moore-Colyer, 2004). In much the same way as the holy cow’s symbolic functioning, the significance of an idealized countryside grew out of disillusionment with the modern city’s competitiveness and materialism as well as nostalgic desire for the “originality of the country, which comes to represent what has been lost and should be reclaimed through the nationalist project” (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015).

While right-wing populist parties may support such local environmentalism, they resist action on transboundary environmental action. Recent research reveals that most right-wing populist parties in Europe vote against climate and energy policies, and justify doing so by citing reasons of economic growth and national independence (Schaller & Carius, 2019, p. 14-27). Combating global warming requires international cooperation. Nativistic right-wing leaders, however, fervently oppose multilateral action, declaring that it would impinge on national sovereignty and self-sufficiency (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015).

Far-right nationalist movements in the United States have also typically adopted anti-environmental stances (Amos, Spears, & Pentina, 2016). Yet John Hultgren (2015) posits that environmental restrictionists cast renewed ties between sovereignty and the politics of ecology. They expound nature protection through registers such as neo-Malthusianism, romanticism, and Darwinism--environmental threads that, as Hultgren showcases, get tightly affixed to xenophobic, anti-immigrant sentiment. The asymmetrical power dynamics, exclusion, and violence that ensue from fixations with borders and belonging within the national body undergird
all intersections between nationalism and nature described here. What is required, then, is a disintegration of “border walls of all sorts—including the green variety” (Hultgren, 2015, p. 180).

The aforementioned examples and the Indian case study signal to how nature is contingently woven into the norms, practices, and structures of nationalist doctrines, and vice versa. They indicate divergent channels through which nationalistic and green thinking clash as well as converge, and, therefore, the multiple junctures at which these entangled webs must be disabled. Contingency and scale, in this way, push us to expand our understanding of who mobilizes nature and to what ends. These frameworks force us to confront the injustices certain commitments to nature may give rise to between and across spatialities. Crucially, they propel us to reflect more deeply on how our own environmentalism has the potential to be implicated in but also oppose socially destructive forces. With this recognition, we may begin the hard work of breaking down border walls and barriers, and, ultimately, set about reimagining healthier, more humane structures and societies, nations as well as natures.
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