

# Eternal Changes

Why the Sanatana Dharma must be opposed

Sagar

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On 2 September, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader Udhayanidhi Stalin compared the Sanatana Dharma—which translates to “eternal religion”—to diseases such as dengue and malaria, arguing it was not enough to oppose it but that it should be eradicated. Immediately, several Bharatiya Janata Party leaders and upper-caste journalists were up in arms, claiming Stalin had hurt the sentiments of all Hindus. Hardeep Singh Puri, the union minister of petroleum and natural gas, said the Sanatana Dharma was “India’s culture and civilisation,” and called those who were speaking against it “brain-damaged.” Jyotiraditya Scindia, the civil-aviation minister, said it was “the foundation of India.” Another union minister, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, resorted to threats, stating that Hindus would “pull out tongues” and “pluck out eyes” of people who spoke against the Sanatana Dharma. Shekhawat was repeating the forms of punishments prescribed for various caste transgressions in the Manusmriti.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself jumped into the fray. On 14 September, in poll-bound Madhya Pradesh, he took aim at the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, the coalition of 28 opposition parties. “It’s the intention of INDI alliance that it shall destroy the idea, the sacraments and the traditions that united India for thousands of years,” Modi said, claiming that the opposition wanted to “disintegrate” the Sanatana Dharma.

There have been many think pieces ever since, with various conservative thought leaders exalting the virtues of Sanatana Dharma. For all intents and purposes, the Sanatana Dharma gained ground as an idea in the nineteenth century in colonial India, in opposition to the religious reforms sought by the Arya Samaj. One of its main tenets was adhering to the caste hierarchy enshrined in Hindu texts.

In his nine years as prime minister, Modi has not hesitated to position himself as a ruler who upholds the authority of religious dogma above his position. This was evident when he laid the foundation stone for the Ram temple in Ayodhya, paraded priests while inaugurating the new parliament building or performed aarti on the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi. The Modi government has spent crores of rupees in rebuilding and renovating Hindu temples such as the Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, and the Jyotirlinga shrines in Ujjain and Kedarnath, among others. It is not an exaggeration to suggest Hindu theology guides Modi’s social, political and economic decisions. And now, with Modi attacking the coalition over Stalin’s remarks, there is no doubt that defending the Sanatana Dharma is going to be a campaign strategy for the BJP in the 2024 general election.

The Sanatana Dharma claims that Hinduism has no beginning and that it has remained unchanged through centuries. BR Ambedkar, the leading architect of the Indian Constitution, wrote *Riddles in Hinduism*, an exposition on the beliefs propounded by what he termed “Brahmanic theology.” Ambedkar approached Hindu religious scriptures as ancient literature or historical sources, instead of as an article of faith. “There is no reason either to call them sacred or infallible,” he wrote. From his study, it is clear that the only thing that remained largely unchanged was the division of Hindu society into four varnas.

The Vedas are considered the most sacred books of Hindus and are classified into four volumes: Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. If there is one thing that separates them from the rest of Vedic literature, it is the belief that they have divine origin. Ambedkar systematically takes apart this belief. He shows how it was in the interest of the Brahmin men who composed Vedic literature to misguide the Hindu masses into believing that it had no human origin and contained the ultimate truth. Its divine status comes from the Purusha Sukta, a later addition. The verse propounds the theory of creation of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras from different parts of the body of a mystical being called Purusha. This is the sanctioning authority for the caste system. Ambedkar is clear about how he sees this, comparing Sanatanism in a 1942 article with Nazi antisemitism.



A sculpture of BR Ambedkar is moved to the stage ahead of a mass ceremony for Dalits converting to Buddhism, on 4 November 2001, in New Delhi. PRAKASH SINGH/AFP/Getty Images

For the best definition of Sanatanism, Ambedkar cites the twelfth-century Brahmin writer Kalluka Bhat's commentary on the Manusmriti. Bhat introduces the word *Kalpa*, a time concept, to establish that Brahma—the god believed to have created the world—reproduced the Vedas from memories from the previous era, or another Kalpa. This would suggest the Vedas, even within this theory, existed within certain time frames and were transferred through Kalpas. According to Ambedkar, the “reckoning of time adopted by the Vedic Brahmins” could be divided into five stages: Varsha (one year), Yuga (epoch or era), Mahayuga (several yugas), Manavantara (several mahayugas) and Kalpa. In short, the Vedas were reproduced in each Kalpa. The real question, Ambedkar argued, was “who made them and not who reproduced them.” The Vedas must have a beginning even though they might not have an end.

Ambedkar culls 11 different explanations on the creation of Vedas from different sources. These include the Vedas originating from the mystical sacrifice of Purusha, springing from the powerful Vedic deity Indra, being contained in the breath of Brahma and being dug up by the gods out of the “mind-ocean.” One of the explanations from the Atharvaveda agrees with the eternity hypothesis: “From time, the Rig (Veda) verses sprang; the Yajus (Veda) sprang from time.” But it also contained other contradictory theories on the origin of Vedas within the Atharvaveda's different sections, such as the Vedas being born out of Skambha—a pillar or supporting principle—and from Indra.

Next, Ambedkar turns to the Rigveda, the oldest Vedic text. He refers to Anukramanis—ancient texts that served as indices, recording the first words, number of verses, the names and families of rishis, deities and verse meters. According to Ambedkar, the fact that the Rigveda mentioned the names of rishis made these indices realistic and confirmed the human origin of the Vedas.

The ancient sages themselves distinguished between newer and older poems they had composed. Ambedkar quotes the verse “Agni, who is worthy to be celebrated by the former, as well as modern rishis, will bring the gods hither” as an example. “If the Hindus believed that the Vedas were the most ancient works in the world no one can have any quarrel with them,” he concludes. “But there is nothing to justify the extraordinary proposition that they are eternal in the sense that they had no beginning in time.”

Ambedkar also busts the second proposition that Hindu society is eternal. Neither theological ideas in ancient texts nor Hindu society remained the same. The former was regularly amended by Brahmins to serve their own “commercial” and “political” interests. The latter transformed thanks to the spread of Buddhism in the subcontinent. Ambedkar gives a vivid description of the Aryan society that existed before the birth of Buddhism. He writes that Aryan society was aristocratic and morally corrupt; people were addicted to alcohol, gambling, bestiality and incest. Buddhism, he argues, helped bring equality among people and shifted the norms of morality in their social behaviour. Ambedkar also credited vegetarianism among Hindus to the influence of Buddhism.

Brahmins were also changing the Hindu belief system from within. “Brahmins have changed,” Ambedkar writes.

There was a time when they worshipped the Vedic Gods. Then came a time when they abandoned their Vedic Gods and started worshiping non-Vedic Gods. One may well ask them—where is Indra, where is Varuna, where is Brahma, where is Mitra—the Gods mentioned in the Vedas? They have all disappeared. And why, because the worship of Indra, Varuna and Brahma ceased to be profitable.

The Hindu religion is now identified with gods such as Vishnu and Shiva, who, Ambedkar points out, were cult figures and not considered Vedic gods until Brahmins appropriated them. Ram and Krishna, too, originated among different communities, until Brahmins built sermons around them to propagate the caste system and establish the supremacy of twice-born castes. Tantra literature made goddesses popular. Ambedkar's assessment of the cults was based on descriptions of their personalities in ancient literature.

“The sects which make up the Hindu religion are of course legion,” Ambedkar writes. Rival sects were later reconciled by the theory of Trimurti, which foregrounded Brahma as creator, Vishnu as preserver

and Shiva as destroyer. Another device that Brahmins used, according to Ambedkar, to appropriate new cults and also reconcile rivalry among different sects was avatar—incarnation. Brahmins did not just create new gods but also amended them at will. For instance, Shiva was a non-Vedic god, so Brahmins associated him with the Vedic deity Rudra to make him acceptable. But, in the Yajurveda, Rudra is described as the “lord of thieves, robbers, dacoits, as the king of the degraded, of potters and blacksmith.” According to the Asvalayana Grihya Sutra, Rudra is a god who should be worshiped with the sacrifice of a bull. “Evidently Rudra was a ‘himsak’ God to whom animal sacrifice was necessary,” Ambedkar concludes. “Shiva on the other hand has been an Ahimsaka God.”

The transformation of gods in ancient times is not difficult to understand if we look at how the BJP has used Hindu gods for political benefit. In the early 1990s, when the BJP was not relevant in national politics, it projected Ram as an angry, muscular and violent god. Thirty years later, while the Ram temple is under construction at the site of the demolished mosque, Modi now describes Ram as a benevolent king who ate a plum given by Shabari, a lower-caste woman, and hugged Nishads, a caste associated with fishing. The Sangh Parivar is also gradually moving from Ram to Krishna to project the latter as a god whose birthplace is yet to be restored. Over the last nine years, Modi has also tried to project himself as a Shaivite by visiting the Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga, in Madhya Pradesh’s Ujjain, last year and performing puja there.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is also notorious for changing the personality of gods. For instance, it transformed the character of Hanuman from being a quiet, disciplined and obedient servant of Ram into an angry, violent creature. The character suits the militant followers of the Sangh, who can now associate themselves with Hanuman, thus acquiring religious sanction for their violent acts against Muslims, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis.

The process of transforming gods is deeply ingrained in the Sangh’s ideology. MS Golwalkar, the ideological force behind the RSS, writes, in his book *Bunch of Thoughts*, “After Buddha, his followers here degenerated. They began to uproot the age-old national traditions of this land.” Golwalkar credits Adi Shankaracharya, the eighth-century Brahmin writer, for “erasing” Buddhism from India “as a distinct sect.” He writes that Shankaracharya rescued Hinduism from Buddhists by reframing Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. The RSS has carried forward this propaganda, which subsumes Buddhism into Hinduism. It should be noted that Ambedkar regards Shankaracharya as an “orthodox writer” who had double standards in his preaching. On one hand, Shankaracharya said that “the Brahma (supreme being) is real and that it pervades all,” giving supremacy to the knowledge theory of salvation over sacrificial rites. On the other hand, he also upheld the graded inequality in the Hindu social order.



A Bajrang Dal worker waves a Hanuman flag. The RSS has transformed the character of Hanuman from being a quiet, disciplined and obedient servant of Ram into an angry and violent creature.  
Sudipta Das/NurPhoto/Getty Images

Golwalkar gives another example of how Brahmins reformed gods. “We worship Lord Shiva, no doubt, but on that account we do not welcome the flock of demons surrounding him,” he writes. The Sangh’s loyalty to its Brahmin forebears can also be understood from its description of the Ramayana. Golwalkar credits Brahmin priests with the killing of Ravana and describes Ram as a mere follower of those priests. “The whole of society and, it is said, even gods were groaning under the heels of Ravana,” he writes. “Then the nation roused itself in the personality of Sri Rama. That great saviour was moulded and guided by sages like Vishwamitra, Vasishtha and Agastya. Not only was Sri Rama set up, but intense national consciousness of the whole of society was kept ablaze by these sages through regular discourses, discussions and various dharmic rites.” In contrast, the current regime now projects Ram as the sole authority that destroyed the demon. Golwalkar’s book reveals whom the RSS pays its allegiance to.

We can understand this from Golwalkar’s explanation on why the RSS adopted a saffron flag as its ultimate ideological authority, instead of any god or guru. “Our scriptures have eulogised in glowing terms the qualities of the Guru and placed him on a pedestal equal to God Himself,” he writes. “We, in Sangh, have therefore chosen a symbol, which would at once reflect the highest and the noblest in our national heritage. And that is the sacred Bhagawa Dhvaj.” Explaining the choice, Golwalkar adds:

Yajna—sacrifice—occupies a pivotal position in our cultural heritage. The term Yajna carries several meanings. Offering one’s individual life in the cause of social regeneration is Yajna. To offer as oblation all that is unworth, undesirable and unholy in us in the fire of virtues, too, is Yajna ... The presiding deity of Yajna is fire. Flame represents the fire and the sacred Bhagawa flag is the symbol of the orange-coloured sacrifice flames.

In *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar does not just justify the caste system but also terms it a protector of Hindu religion that saved it from foreign invaders.

Ambedkar outlines two purposes of his inquiry into Vedic literature. He writes that his first purpose was to “make the mass of people to realize that Hindu religion is not Sanatan” and the second was “to draw attention of the Hindu masses to the devices of the Brahmins and to make them think for themselves how they have been deceived and misguided by the Brahmins.” In his undelivered speech “Annihilation of Caste,” Ambedkar appeals to Hindus to abandon their dogmas if they want any reformation in Hindu religion.

The opposition parties, an amalgamation of Brahminical and lower-caste parties, should see an opportunity in the Sanatana Dharma debate to employ Ambedkar’s methods and appeal to the majority Hindus to detach themselves from their irrational beliefs and reclaim their gods. They cannot continue avoiding the subject by arguing that such debates are only diversions that take away attention from Modi’s administrative failure. It could be so, but the opposition cannot stop people from getting affected by religious propaganda without commenting on it.

Such debates on religion have the potential to take away the political leverage that the opposition parties receive as a result of inflation, rising unemployment, cronyism and social injustice. They should be mindful that the BJP has found the language to speak on what used to be its Achilles heel. The week the BJP targeted the opposition leaders using the Sanatana Dharma remark, the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, acknowledged the presence of caste discrimination and also supported reservation. The Sangh can do that while continuously negating affirmative action through their governments at the centre and in several states.

However, the opposition parties are neither here nor there on religion. They are neither spreading rationality, through the teachings of anti-caste leaders such as Ambedkar or Periyar, nor taking a stand on religion. The only response to Hinduism they have is to imitate the BJP by participating in Hindu rituals and glorifying the religion. Even though they know the strategy of projecting themselves as real Hindus has not worked in the past, they continue to side with the BJP on Hinduism. Before 2024, the opposition must find its language to speak on Hinduism.

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