

The Double-Sidedness of Hindutva: Inside the BJP's Think-Tanks

Abstract: This article examines the BJP's attempt to build centers of elite, traditional intellectuals by bringing together a variety of stakeholders in government and civil society. While dismantling advisory committees and attacking universities and established research institutions, the BJP has also sought to build think tanks to give its political ideology a footprint in already established policy networks. Some scholars have characterised the BJP's think tanks as institutions of 'soft Hindutva'¹, that is, organisations that avoid overt association with the BJP and Hindu nationalist linkages but pursue a diffuse Hindutva agenda nevertheless. Through a study of the BJP's two most prominent think tanks, I examine how such organisations build an alternative sense of respectable intellectual legitimacy, consolidate Hindutva networks across political, administrative, and military fields, and build a 'mimetic' Hindutva intellectual culture. I show how the think tanks negotiate a fine balance between projecting a 'respectable' religious conservatism along with an aggressive Hindu majoritarianism. My findings demonstrate how manifestations of Hindutva can be both explicitly political and anti-political at the same time: advocating for political interventionism while eschewing politics and forging an apolitical route towards cultural transformation.

Keywords: India, ideology, think tanks, BJP, legitimacy, hegemony

Word count: 9,759

¹ E. Anderson, "Neo-Hindutva": the Asia House MF Husain campaign and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Britain', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 23/1 (2015), 45–66.

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In recent years, a global and regional anti-intellectual political discourse has sought to discredit bastions of socio-culturally elite intellectuals, academics, and researchers in the policy ecosystem². Against this backdrop, the current ruling party in India and its supporters have been building alternatives to what they call an 'entrenched' left-liberal hold over intellectual legitimacy. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) administration post-2014 has sought to legitimize and disseminate its ideas in distinctly different ways from the Congress regime between 2009-2014. During the Congress regime, the Government's Planning Commission (created post-Independence as a centralised economic planning body) included advisors from civil society groups, grassroots organizations, and NGOs using elite voices to bring legitimacy and amplification to certain social activist causes (i.e Right To Information, Right To Education, Right To Food)³. The BJP government has a vastly different relationship to ideas emerging from civil society and to external critique. It has replaced the previous paradigm of bringing in advisors from civil society groups, NGOs and grassroots activists, with its networks spanning supporters, members, and affiliates of the Sangh Parivar (the RSS family).

While dismantling advisory committees and attacking universities and established research institutions, the BJP has formed think tanks to give its political ideology a footprint in already established policy networks. In 2008, the BJP instituted its own 'ecosystem' of policy makers in two key think tanks (India Foundation and Chanakya Institute), as a way to build support networks leading up to the 2009 national election. The former Vice President of the BJP called this a tactical shift: from being seen as just action-oriented to solidifying its own ideological underpinnings in a policy framework⁴. While the BJP lost in 2009, it won by a landslide in 2014, and these two think-tanks provided personnel for many positions within the Central Government. This conjuncture of events suggests a deliberate strategy towards ideological hegemony in Delhi's policy world. As Palshikar notes of the current Hindutva hegemony in governance, 'it shapes a consensus around what is to be debated and what is beyond debate'⁵. It attempts to draw boundaries around the norms of political and policy contestation. While it is important not to conflate the BJP's claims with their results, studying the presentation of these think tanks gives insight into how the contours of the intellectual elite, or who are considered to be the intellectual elite and/or 'experts', shift. In deconstructing their aims and the messages they put out, we see the binaries they enforce and the discursive techniques they use to frame a range of legitimate policy choices.

² M. A. Peters, 'Anti-intellectualism is a virus', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51/4 (2019), 357–63.

³ P. Chacko, 'The Right Turn in India: Authoritarianism, Populism and Neoliberalisation', *Journal of contemporary Asia*, 48/4 (2018), 541–65.

⁴ N. Hebbar, 'At mid-term, Modi's BJP on cusp of change', (2017).

⁵ S. Palshikar, 'Politics in the Times of Hegemony', *Seminar*, 725 (2020).

This article delves deeper into two variants of the BJP's think tanks: actively political and actively a-political. In doing so, I follow Reddy's⁶ call to pay close attention to the different 'vernaculars' of Hindutva politics and anti-politics. Due to the elite centralisation of policy making culture in New Delhi, and the relatively recent prominence of think tanks, their internal mechanisms have thus far been difficult to access. As such, these significant organisations of knowledge production and dissemination have escaped scholarly analysis. I fill this gap by examining the BJP's attempt to build centers of elite, traditional intellectuals of their own through think tanks, media outlets, policy conventions and conferences by bringing together a variety of elite stakeholders in government and civil society. Some scholars have characterised the BJP's think tanks as institutions of 'soft Hindutva'⁷, that is, organisations that avoid overt association with the BJP and Hindu nationalist linkages but pursue a diffuse Hindutva agenda (what Anderson (2015)⁸ calls 'neo-Hindutva') nevertheless. I build on these preliminary observations to examine internal conversations within these think tanks about their outward positioning, their articulation of their mission, and their outreach techniques. Through a study of the BJP's two most prominent think tanks, I show how the think tanks negotiate a fine balance between projecting a respectable religious conservatism along with an aggressive Hindu majoritarianism. This article offers the double-sidedness of Hindutva as a framework for understanding the BJP's wide-ranging strategy, but also adds to a comprehension of political legitimacy and the modern incarnation of ethno-nationalism in an era defined by secular liberalism.

I begin with a brief overview of what I am calling the double-sidedness of Hindutva: a force that is both self-righteously majoritarian and apolitically intercultural. In recognising this duality, I join other scholars⁹ who have recently noted that new manifestations of Hindutva are adopting two similar movements, often simultaneously:

On one hand...familiar assertions of ethnicist identitarian politics: sometimes reactive, abrasive, but always sharp critique of the contradictions of liberalism and the many inconsistencies of secularism and the unfairness of modern Indian governance, particularly to its majority of Hindus. On the other hand, paradoxically, are appeals to neutralizing frameworks that lift away from the very corruptions of politics that form the basis of ethnicist critique, taking pride in indigenous, civilizational heritage and inter-linkages between Indic groups¹⁰

⁶ D. S. Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 26/4 (2018), 483–90.

⁷ Anderson, "Neo-Hindutva": the Asia House MF Husain campaign and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Britain'.

⁸ Anderson, "Neo-Hindutva": the Asia House MF Husain campaign and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Britain'.

⁹ E. Anderson and A. Longkumer, "Neo-Hindutva": evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 26/4 (2018), 371–77; Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?'.

¹⁰ Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?', 490.

The two think tanks I examine in this article exemplify this duality. The Chanakya Institute has denied direct links to the BJP or the RSS, yet RSS ideologues have held and currently hold strong positions within the organization. Since the BJP gained power in 2014, several members of the CI have secured strong positions within the government: as National Security Advisor, Principal Secretaries to the Prime Minister, and several members of the newly renamed Planning Commission, the Niti Aayog. While CI claims to be independent and non-partisan, it bases its research on proliferating the government's aims, self-professedly falling 'under a broad head called nation-building' that institutions of higher learning and universities 'have neglected'¹¹. On the other hand, the India Foundation, a think tank run by the General Secretary of the BJP, has relatively explicit ties to both the RSS and the BJP. Rather than attempting to create an academic, intellectual respect for Hindu civilisation and Sanskrit texts as CI does, India Foundation's mandate is to explicitly 'groom' a new class of politicians and policy makers.

I focus on ethnographic data I collected during a 10-week internship in 2017 and follow-up interviews I conducted before the national elections in 2019, to trace CI's negotiations with furthering the BJP's hyper-nationalist politics through an objectivist, academic legitimacy. Often, it pursues both an anti-political and an a-political, civilisational call to national unity to further its political legitimacy. I interweave this with a discussion of how India Foundation, on the other hand, pursues its own, starkly different, politically-interventionist mandate. As interviews with their leadership demonstrate, IF's explicit desire to occupy the ranks of 'traditional intellectuals', while molding a new class of nationalist policy makers, falls alongside more rigid, yet cloaked, claims to Hindu nationhood. In the process, I show how both think tanks build an alternative sense of respectable intellectual legitimacy, consolidate Hindutva networks across political, administrative, and military fields, and build a mimetic Hindutva intellectual culture.

The double-sidedness of Hindutva

While Hindutva has experienced a resurgence since 2014, Hindu nationalism has been an undercurrent of Indian nationalism for at least eight decades¹². Collective uprisings during the independence movement even derived a political ethic and epistemology through fundamentally religious terms: for instance, revolutionary nationalists took oath on the Bhagavad Gita, and expressed allegiance to Bharat Mata (Mother India) in terms that equated Hindu nationhood with Indian nationhood¹³. In its current politico-cultural manifestation, Hindutva's appeal has led recent legal decisions to criminalise 'triple talaq'¹⁴, dismantle

¹¹ CI Mission Statement

¹² A. Gudavarthy, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

¹³ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Triple talaq refers to a practice within Muslim communities that allows Muslim men to divorce and abandon their wives by saying or writing the word 'talaq' three times. Those who campaigned to criminalise this practice on the Hindu right did so under the guise of protecting Muslim women from being abandoned by their husbands without any accountability. While there is some validity to this

Article 370¹⁵, and build a Hindu temple on the site of a historically demolished mosque, to pass with positive public reception. Beyond furthering claims towards a Hindu nation, these events demonstrate how the BJP has been able to effectively ‘carve out an acceptability to its larger worldview’¹⁶. New forms of data mining and media have allowed the BJP to target their messages to specific communities, needs, desires, anxieties, and values¹⁷. However, persuasive strategy does not need to assume an a priori cognitive assonance between constituents and their leader. Insofar as it is inherently communicative¹⁸, persuasion relies on an interactive negotiation of making allowances, sidelining contradictions, and reframing existing beliefs, such that the desired end result may be achieved by the creation of ‘alternative logics’¹⁹. These logics do not necessitate a narrative coherence or even logical rationales, but allow the BJP to target specific political and economic visions to different groups without having to explain their contradictions. Simultaneously, these logics receive legitimacy by creating new and infiltrating existing cultural and institutional structures.

A large corpus of work details how Hindutva has entered the vernacular of various local political contexts, and is operationalised by political actors affiliated or not affiliated to the Sangh Parivar²⁰. A similar breadth of work exists on the language of rage and grievance

argument, women’s groups have also argued that criminalising this practice rather than invalidating it could prevent husbands from paying post-divorce dues, leaving their wives and children without financial security and at risk to vengeful family members (J. Jones, ‘Will criminalising triple talaq help India’s muslim women?’, (2019). Instead of assuring post-divorce security, the Hindu right’s focus on criminalising triple talaq primarily targets Muslim communities and reinforces the rhetoric of Muslim women as victims to regressive Muslim men. These debates are part of a larger contention within Indian legal rights between instituting a Uniform Civil Code instead of allowing religion-specific Personal Laws.

¹⁵ Article 370 of the Constitution, instituted by Prime Minister Nehru, India’s first prime minister, gave special status to the region of Muslim-dominated Kashmir to retain some level of autonomy, its own constitution, flag, and right to amend its own laws. By dismantling Article 370, then, the BJP government has laid stake to Kashmir as Indian territory, ostensibly to ‘bring development’ to the region (BBC News, ‘What happened in Kashmir and why it matters’, (2019).) Yet, in most ways, this move has led to increased military occupation, state shutdowns, curfews, and violence by the Indian state.

¹⁶ Palshikar, ‘Politics in the Times of Hegemony’.

¹⁷ For a detailed account of Modi’s varying election promises on the campaign trail in 2014, see C. Jaffrelot, ‘The Modi-centric BJP 2014 election campaign: new techniques and old tactics’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 23/2 (2015), 151–66..

¹⁸ M. Dainton, ‘Explaining Theories of Persuasion’, *Applying communication theory for professional life: a practical introduction*, (2005).

¹⁹ S. Hall, ‘The great moving right show’, *Marxism Today*, 23/1 (1979), 14–20.

²⁰ I. Therwath, ‘Cyber-hindutva: Hindu nationalism, the diaspora and the Web’, *Social sciences information. Information sur les sciences sociales*, 51/4 (2012), 551–77; V. Bénéï and C. J. Fuller, ‘Teaching nationalism in Maharashtra schools’, in V. Bénéï, C. J. Fuller (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, (London, UK: Hurst & Co., 2001), p. 240; M. Bhattacharjee, ‘Seva, hindutva, and the politics of post-earthquake relief and reconstruction in rural Kutch’, *Asian Ethnology*, 75/1 (2016), 75; T. B. Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, (Princeton University Press, 2018); T. B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, (Princeton University Press, 1999); C. Jaffrelot, ‘Hindu Nationalism: Strategic Syncretism in Ideology Building’, *Economic and political weekly*, 28/12/13 (1993), 517–24; D. S. Reddy, *Religious Identity and Political Destiny: Hindutva in the Culture of Ethnicism*, (Rowman Altamira, 2006); D. Reddy, ‘Hindutva as Praxis’, *Religion Compass*, 5/8 (2011), 412–26.

(what Jaffrelot²¹ calls 'the art of being outraged') rooted in Hindutva's anti-politics. This anti-politics is, at its core, a critique of prevailing political paradigms that have governed post-Independence India: those of left-leaning, secular, universalist ideals that have enforced a desacralisation of public life²². Within this anti-politics, there is a distinct call to the a-political as well. Typically, the anti-political asserts opposition to establishment political paradigms²³, while the apolitical often sees itself as politically neutral, presenting the option of a social life that transcends or is separate from politics (what Swyngedouw²⁴ has called 'post-political', and what van der Veer sees as culture that is 'emptied of' religion and politics²⁵). The two categories are not clear-cut, and scholars have, in recent years, tried to make sense of how (and whether) we can conceptualise ontological boundaries to the political, lest all of social life fall into this category and we regard all assertions of the 'non-political' as illusory. Candea²⁶, for one, cautions against seeing those that claim non-politics as only being farcical, deceptive, or enacting a form of overly determined politics. In our case, however, apolitical representations of Hindutva do, more often than not, tend to coincide with its political organisations. Here, I refer not only to notions of generalised Hindu nationhood, but to other forms of apolitical asceticism that are more readily associated with social work, tradition, discipline, and other cultural norms that are 'clothed in humanitarianism'²⁷ and thus able to, ostensibly, abstain from active political matters. The RSS, for example, calls itself a cultural organisation focused on non-governmental social work, yet it is also the core of the BJP's militarised, grassroots ranks.

Here, Hindutva's apolitical and anti-political formations collide and act as its strength. As Hansen²⁸ and Reddy²⁹ insightfully note, the contemporary apolitical offers itself as a rallying cry, providing both philosophical and affective liberation from the depths of ostensibly corrupt, dirty politics. A widely regarded shift from scholars like Wendy Brown³⁰ and foundationally, James Ferguson³¹, has argued that neoliberal formulations of governance have shifted the way human beings are governed, evacuating political struggle from certain

²¹ 'Hindu Nationalism and the (Not So Easy) Art of Being Outraged: The Ram Setu Controversy', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 2 (2008).

²² Reddy, *Religious Identity and Political Destiny: Hindutva in the Culture of Ethnicism*.

²³ E. Humphrys, 'Anti-politics, the early Marx and Gramsci's "integral state"', *Thesis Eleven*, 147/1 (2018), 29–44; Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*; J. Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: 'development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, (U of Minnesota Press, 1994).

²⁴ 'Apocalypse Forever?', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27/2-3 (2010), 213–32.

²⁵ P. van der Veer, 'Global breathing: Religious utopias in India and China', *Anthropological Theory*, 7/3 (2007), 315–28.

²⁶ M. Candea, 'Making a Space for the Non-Political in the Anthropology of Politics', *Current anthropology*, 52/3 (2011), 309–34.

²⁷ Bhattacharjee, 'Seva, hindutva, and the politics of post-earthquake relief and reconstruction in rural Kutch'.

²⁸ T. Blom Hansen, 'The political theology of violence in contemporary India', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 2 (2008).

²⁹ Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?'.

³⁰ W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, (MIT Press, 2015).

³¹ Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: 'development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*.

situations in favour of an anti-political technocratic managerialism³². Other scholars have examined how Modi's call for development has accompanied attempts to reformulate conceptions of the political³³. His rhetoric of development can, in this regard, be understood as an 'apolitics of inclusion' that seeks to transcend regional divisions towards a nationalised aspiration³⁴. In this vein, Reddy's concept of Hindutva as 'praxis' explains that Hindutva has become a *mediating* political discourse, moving between ideological certainty to diffuse, non-political, and negotiated formulations³⁵. As such, it can be drawn on by hardcore ideologues, critics, sympathisers, affiliates and so on to strategically make their own claims. Rather than reconciling its different messages, such as that of secular moderation with majoritarian nationalism, or state intervention with economic liberalisation, the Hindutva 'family' of organisations thus builds legitimacy through a varied set of persuasive tactics that are able to coexist despite maintaining a tense dissonance.

I offer the double-sidedness of neo-Hindutva as a core framework for recognising strategies that move through the political, anti-political, and apolitical. These seemingly contradictory discourses become Hindutva's strength. They allow it to function as a force that projects aggressive majoritarianism, while simultaneously claiming an anti-political 'neutral' face of civilisational purity and inter-religious inclusion. While some notions of ideology understand it as a systematic and coherent body of ideas³⁶, Hodge's concept of 'ideological complexes' suggests that contradiction is key to how ideology achieves its effects³⁷. As Stuart Hall³⁸ has shown, dominant and preferred meanings tend to interact with negotiated and oppositional meanings in a continual struggle. Thus, as Hindutva becomes a mediating political discourse, it may risk incoherence yet defines the terms through which the socio-political world is discussed. My findings demonstrate that the BJP's think tanks attempt to legitimize its ideas and policies by building a base of both seemingly-apolitical expertise and, what they call, 'politically interventionist' intellectuals. Neo-Hindutva can be both explicitly political and anti-political at the same time : advocating for political interventionism (through the India Foundation), while eschewing politics and forging an apolitical route towards cultural transformation (through the Chanakya Institute)³⁹. However, contrary to critical scholarship that tends to subsume claims of apolitical motivation within forms of false-consciousness or

³² N. Postero and E. Elinoff, 'Introduction: A return to politics', *Anthropological Theory*, 19/1 (2019), 3–28.

³³ A. Vanaik, *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism: Secular Claims, Communal Realities*, (Verso, 2017).

³⁴ L. T. Flåten, 'Spreading Hindutva through education: Still a priority for the BJP?', (2017); S. Palshikar, 'The BJP and Hindu Nationalism: Centrist Politics and Majoritarian Impulses', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38/4 (2015), 719–35; Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?'; E. Anderson and C. Jaffrelot, 'Hindu nationalism and the "saffronisation of the public sphere": an interview with Christophe Jaffrelot', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 26/4 (2018), 468–82.

³⁵ Reddy, 'Hindutva as Praxis'.

³⁶ N. Fairclough, 'Language and Power, 1989', *Harlow: Longman*, (2001).

³⁷ B. Hodge, 'Ideology, Identity, Interaction: Contradictions and Challenges for Critical Discourse Analysis', *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 5/2 (2012).

³⁸ S. Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*, 16676 (2001).

³⁹ Anderson and Longkumer, "Neo-Hindutva": evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism'.

backdoor-politics, I note that several researchers at the Chanakya Institute do genuinely see themselves as conducting apolitical, academic research. Rather than willful ignorance, their acknowledgement of the organisation's underlying ideology understands the heavy religious organisational undertones as more *cultural* than political⁴⁰. This distinction takes the cultural and religious parts of Hindutva 'out of' politics, allowing it to be practiced and consumed as a generalisable national ethos.

In this vein, the BJP discredits, infiltrates, and also imitates several aspects of liberal intellectual culture, with its members and affiliates participating in or hosting literary and book festivals⁴¹, cultural festivals (Festival of Indic Culture, Kumbh Mela), specialised or partisan TV channels (Times Now, Republic TV, NaMo TV), and educational conferences, amongst others. What I am calling the mimetic aspect of this intellectual culture is an attempt to normalise Hindutva ideas, but also to gain a larger respectability by building a culture of knowledge production through legible institutions of modernity. As Lal notes about Hindutva in general, the remedy to the Hindu right's 'flawed scholarship' is not simply to outrightly reject science or to claim conservative traditionalism, but to claim scholarly authority by combining 'the language of Hinduism [with] the epistemological imperatives of modernity and the nation-state'⁴².

The BJP's think tanks not only try to legitimize the party's ideology and give their work intellectual authority. They are also attempts to propagate particular paradigms of virtuous nationhood, through both emotionally and cognitively resonant themes of collective belonging. In Gramsci's characterisation of political and economic struggle, intellectuals play a pivotal role in shifting discursive formations⁴³. Hegemony, then, encompasses the complex ways consent and coercion are entangled with each other. It allows a fundamental class to exert political, intellectual and moral leadership within a system grounded by a common worldview i.e organic ideology. In a liberal capitalist society, organic elite intellectuals tend to provide personnel for the coercive organs of political society while traditional intellectuals, in civil society, create authoritative knowledge leading people to consent. Constituting 'a knot of tangled power'⁴⁴, Gramsci's concept of the integral state understands civil society and the state to be co-constitutive⁴⁵. Gramsci, then, emphasizes that any group that is struggling to gain dominance must 'conquer and assimilate 'ideologically', the traditional intellectuals'⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?'

⁴¹The Pondy Lit Fest, 'The Pondy Lit Fest 2019'.

⁴² V. Lal, 'The Politics of History on the Internet: Cyber-Diasporic Hinduism and the North American Hindu Diaspora', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 8/2 (1999), 137–72.

⁴³ D. Forgacs (ed.), *The Gramsci Reader*, (2000); A. Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, (NYU Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ K. Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, 1st edition ed. (University of California Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Humphrys, 'Anti-politics, the early Marx and Gramsci's 'integral state''.

⁴⁶ Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, (Lawrence & Wishart, 2005), 10.

In his foundational essay on communist propaganda, for example, William Griffiths uses the words *propaganda* and *education* interchangeably⁴⁷, maintaining that the dissemination of information through educational practices normalises certain frames of thought. However, in much the same way that all claims of non-politics must not be seen as false consciousness, Van Dijk asserts that all knowledge is not necessarily ideology. While group knowledge based on a set of assumptions may be ideologically based, pre-supposed knowledge may be agreed on by groups across ideological differences. In addition, knowledge is relative to a community and often inter-subjectively 'objective' within that community⁴⁸. Indeed, the BJP has sought to use schools, textbooks, films, music, and other cultural artefacts to legitimize, persuade, and propagate their party's ideals of nationhood. As such, a key part of the think tanks' mission is an educational one: they provide reasons and logical arguments for what is just, unjust, good, and bad. The BJP's think tanks run a series of youth workshops, training programmes, and other short-term educational institutes to educate the youth with their message.

In an interview, BJP MP Swapan Dasgupta pointed out that these fellowship programmes appeal to large groups of young people from all around the country. While many are already passionate about the politics of the BJP or the RSS, these programmes tend to recruit science and engineering graduates who are not politicised against the BJP (as social science and humanities graduates tend to be), and are able to apply their technical skills to a political framework. Indeed, science and engineering graduates are valued by the current administration - their skills, technical ability, and potential innovation are encouraged and seen as relevant to technologically-oriented economic growth⁴⁹. These young people either see themselves as apolitical, or consciously support the aspirational, market-oriented rhetoric of the BJP while dismissing (or supporting) its communal narrative. In contrast, the Congress continues to signify an exclusionary, English-speaking elite to those who do not have access to the upper echelons of the establishment. These forms of public engagement elaborate on the think tank's main mission: to challenge universalism, which they understand to be the promotion of broad-based 'Western' ideas of culture, history, and civilization.

Methods

The findings in this article are based on ethnographic data I collected during a 10-week internship with the Chanakya Institute in 2017, and follow-up interviews with senior researchers, fellows, and junior research staff conducted with CI and IF before the national elections in 2019. During the internship, I conducted an ethnography of the institution, attending internal meetings, public meetings, private meetings with administrative staff and research assistants, and engaged in several informal conversations with research staff and

⁴⁷ W. E. Griffiths, 'Communist propaganda', *Propaganda and communication in world history*, 2 (1979), 234–41.

⁴⁸ T. A. Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11/2 (2006), 115–40, 131.

⁴⁹ L. Irani, *Chasing Innovation Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India*, (2019).

other interns. This participant observation gave me a window into the conscious and unconscious practices of debate, conversation, and silences at CI. As an upper-caste, Hindu researcher with prior experience in Delhi's think tank world and a family in the civil services, I was a (partial) cultural insider. As such, I made my intentions to study the workings of the organisation clear prior to the start of my internship, even though I was less explicit about my critique in discussions with senior researchers. Moreover, I was straightforward with the younger researchers about my understanding of the organisation's role in shifting the terms of policy debate. In fact, my interactions with the younger research staff and fellow interns gave me insight into the breaches and fissures of the organisation's self-presentation within and outside of policy circles. Through this immersive engagement, I was able to explore the extent of Hindutva's representational force in elite domains of policy-making and opinion-making work.

I have anonymised and protected the research staff that I quote in this article, many of whom are no longer affiliated with the organisation, and anonymised senior research fellows where requested. As CI may be thinly disguised to those who are familiar with Delhi's policy networks, I have attempted to refrain from providing specific details of the personnel and senior staff, apart from where necessary to the argument. While excerpts from interviews and ethnographic data are effective in representing the think tank's intentions, they cannot necessarily be accepted at face value. In order to provide more of a landscape of evidence, I have collected data from the organisations' published articles, events, and online presence. Although the organisation's pamphlets and publications do not necessarily travel beyond limited circles, the senior researchers at both India Foundation and the CI, in most cases, hold individual prestige and prominence in elite political, administrative, and military circles. As such, the think tanks' influence is achieved less from spreading their published material, and more from the researchers' participation in public discourse and dissemination of their analysis through television channels, educational lecture series, mainstream newspapers, and partisan magazines. Although an in-depth analysis of all these appearances is outside the scope of this paper, their acknowledgement is key to contextualise the BJP's intellectual presence.

Inside the think tanks

Upstairs/Downstairs

A wooden oval table seats about thirty members of the Chanakya Institute (CI), a reputable think-tank in the neat, green heart of New Delhi. Former military heads, diplomats, senior administrative officers crowd the head of the table, while fifteen to twenty younger research staff sit further down. As they wait for the Director, the mostly-retired senior staff discuss Modi's visit to the US earlier that week, 'Trump is a buffoon, he doesn't have basic comprehension skills.' Scattered chatter, cups of chai clink on the table. Moments later, the Director walks to the head of the table, gestures to an empty chair next to his and introduces a

retired Ambassador, a 'part of the family' according to the Director. On the projector screen is a slide displaying the title: 'Talk on critical importance of original research for think-tanks with special reference to CI'. Applause. 'Indian think-tanks don't do as much original research as Western ones do', the Ambassador begins. What really is a think-tank? It is 'a group of experts organized to study an issue and provide information, ideas, and solutions to problems posed by those issues', he says. He goes on to declaim that 'A good think-tank helps inform policy with work as rigorous as academia and as accessible as journalism. We are spared the sterility of academe and have the opportunity to influence policy'.

As younger research staff gazes intently at the Ambassador, he continues: 'We deal with the ethos of the nation – there is no facet of national life that does not deal with national security. We belong to an institution that has to deal with the widest scope of possibility. I emphasize how much a think-tank is influenced by ownership or funding. So we made sure that CI would not accept foreign or government funding – the Board Of Trustees ensures that it should be independent and only accept funding from like minded people.' At this point, there is vehement nodding by the senior members of the organization around him. Some mutter their agreement, while one of the other founders chimes in, 'We are non-partisan, but we have been lucky enough to have a responsive government in power now'.

Following his cue, another founder of the organization, a middle-aged former Colonel, swiftly adds, 'Though we are not linked to the BJP or RSS, make no mistake, the ideology is distinctly right of center. A strongly nationalist, India First, is the leit-motif of this organization and we do nothing that undermines or damages the nation. This has governed this organization.' There is nervous shifting around the room, exchanged glances by the younger researchers. This overt declaration has breached the objective academic sheen of their usual meetings. 'When we started, we decided we would develop in-house positions on issues and stick to these positions. Everyone should be aware of our ideology and our commitment. The cause that is our nation is bigger than the CI and it is what we are serving.' Affirming nods around the table. Scattered note-taking. The Ambassador goes on to expound on the necessity of rigorous empirical and academic research so that CI doesn't simply become a tool through which to reiterate existing opinions, but can be 'pathbreaking' in its research.

This internal conversation perhaps exemplifies the primary tension within CI: of neutral academic objectivity and Hindu majoritarianism. While I began my internship expecting to see this tension, I did not anticipate the organisation's ambivalent positioning to be its strength. Much like Hindutva overall, CI seems to derive its legibility and its credibility precisely from flitting between Hindu majoritarianism and neutral claims to inter-religious harmony. Indeed, maintaining its neutral, academic facade means that Hindutva is scarcely mentioned in conversations with and between higher-level research fellows. Through conversations with members of the younger research staff, I found out that Hindutva, as a movement, is never explicitly mentioned in the meetings with higher-level officers. One

researcher told me eagerly that the organisation was filled with 'former military staff and right-wing sycophants, with an icing of Hindutva and an aroma of a think-tank'. When asked if the organisation is then considered credible, they responded vehemently – 'if any think-tank has influence on policy right now, it's this one – it's full of heavyweights, former military chiefs, foreign secretaries, and so on'. Despite decrying the left-liberal university environment, CI's research fellows are visibly seeking to assimilate to the genre of 'legitimate' academic space. Yet there is a cyclical relationship between their research, analysis, and predetermined conclusions. Rather than acknowledging a compromised academic rigour, they are certain that empirical data will support their pre-decided 'in-house positions' supporting the BJP's politics.

Although CI's ambivalence might lead to a lack of credibility within left-liberal intellectuals, its members have already-existing inroads to key decision-makers within the central government. It became apparent to me that the credibility of the organisation lies in the power and prestige of the individual senior researchers who are reshaping the composition of socially anointed 'experts' in the public domain. As such, it seeks to develop a legitimate voice through the embodied authority of its high-level research fellows. Two kinds of research staff populate CI's ranks: individually eminent senior fellows, and junior researchers. The top leadership and founders are former military leaders, diplomats, and retired or current members of the government administration. Senior fellows for research have varying affiliations to government ministries, alluded allegiances to the BJP or members of the BJP, while a handful have doctoral degrees in international relations from accredited universities. The younger research staff primarily have Masters degrees in international relations or region-specific foreign policy, and write the bulk of the research articles published on the website and in pamphlets. A few researchers who received degrees at Jawaharlal Nehru University, a historically Marxist-oriented university, have to repeatedly deny suspicion of their 'anti-nationalism' (a term used to degrade left-liberals as the enemy) in internal staff meetings, and affirm that they are, indeed, nationalists. The senior staff decry the internet as presenting 'alternative facts' and assert that younger researchers should go to primary sources (as in, original Sanskrit texts) for information as often as possible, rather than basing their articles on secondary knowledge and analysis. They frequently refer to the historical authenticity and genuine wisdom of ancient Hindu texts, while criticizing modern interpretations and English translations as neo-imperial. This negotiation exemplifies the intricate, delicate, and often breached dance between the boundaries of empirical research and partisan ideology, and the back-and-forth of creating new knowledge *through referring* to older, civilisational texts.

The spatial division of books in the library basement, and the architecture and décor of the building materially manifest this institutional disjunction. The basement houses the library – one filled with books on India's appeasement of Muslims, the RSS political vision, India's failed socialist past, and the threats of Pakistan and China. Stocked magazines report a review of what Urdu press in the country are reporting, gathering intelligence and information about

the 'other side'. Part of this is a wide set of bookshelves stacking green folders filled with news articles written about Pakistan since its inception in 1947. Hindu idols and scrolls adorn other walls of the basement. Upstairs, however, is where the administrative staff and researchers sit. Upon entering, a large photograph of CI's senior leaders, Prime Minister Modi, and an assortment of religious leaders at a conference – exemplifying their claim to seek harmony in diversity. Here, form mirrors content: CI's project is to bring the ideological base(ment) of the BJP to the policy table in a way that rewrites and re-presents it to be in India's collective, national interest – a collective that it implicitly defines as Hindu. A deeply political basement library is filled with literature advocating Hindutva, decrying Islam and propagating stories of Muslim appeasement and 'Islamic imperialism', whereas the upstairs continues to insist on its apolitical leanings and that the organization has no religious or party affiliation. This double-sidedness is housed under the same roof, in the same building with the architectural façade of a temple and statues of gods and goddesses within.

Other interns serve as sources of intimate knowledge in this space, as they are both part of this world and separate from it. They often secure internships because of family connections. Dhiraj, a young BJP supporter pursuing an undergraduate degree in Economics in the US, is the son of a former research fellow. He admits allegiance to the institution and the BJP while simultaneously critiquing it through facetious and self-deprecating remarks. On my first day, Dhiraj told me that the organization is 'filled with right-wing nuts, but I'm of that ideological bent so it's okay'. Dhiraj's nuanced treatment of Hindutva as religion, a/politics, and movement is indicative of Udupa's⁵⁰ analysis of 'enterprise Indians': savvy and cosmopolitan supporters who acknowledge the contradictions and dilemmas around Hindu nationalist thought, and are able to position themselves in favour of and opposition to selective aspects of it. They are able to comfortably dismiss the 'fringe' elements of the *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors) as 'ruffians', but can support online trolling as necessary for the cause. He points me to several books that emphasize the importance of Hindutva ('except for when it goes too far'), talking about how its necessary to reclaim unity and a defence against the forces of Islam and Christianity (from the West). Dhiraj disputes the narrative that 'Hinduism is a way of life' (as the Supreme Court stated in 1995), but maintains that 'we need Hindutva to maintain India's unity'. He is vocal about his awareness of the left-liberal debates on Hindutva, and uses it to signal what he sees as a pragmatic support. Such discourses of pragmatism are evident throughout conversations with senior technocrats and young savvy Indians who occupy these organisations, and are sometimes used to bolster a politics of grievance and temper expressions of rage.

'Zeal'

While I conducted fieldwork in 2017, there were repeated, violent attacks around the nation against Muslims carrying, or being suspected of carrying, beef. These violent, mob-fuelled incidents were heightened during Eid and, while they spurred several protests in the city

⁵⁰ S. Udupa, 'Gaali cultures: The politics of abusive exchange on social media', *New Media & Society*, 20/4 (2018), 1506–22.

against rising Hindu nationalism, internal meetings to discuss current affairs remained entirely silent about them. Instead, their conversations revolved around how 'saffron terrorism' (Hindutva followers who attacked Muslims and sites of Islamic worship) is a myth concocted by the mainstream media, and Muslims are the 'real threat'. There is silence about internal debates within the BJP and party politics, only a consensus supporting Modi and the current administration. The senior staff never discuss religion, because, to quote Dhiraj, 'it's a touchy subject'. The administrative head of the organisation presents a breach of this façade, where he asserts Hindu superiority, and a war of ideas that is being won through a 'missionary zeal'. As administrative head, Manoj perhaps exemplifies the Gramscian 'organic intellectual' of CI. The senior researchers occupy the position of traditional intellectuals, those who see themselves connected to no particular social class and as autonomous and independent. Instead, Manoj is a more active political organiser: no doubt a member of the RSS who disregards the farce of objective academia, but instead sees academia as a legitimate means through which to assert ideas.

Dressed in a crisp white kurta and pajama, Manoj often sat in the library with several books scattered open around him. Books on the RSS vision, appeasement of Muslims, and Christian threats to India's unity. He introduced me to an older scholar who wrote a book about a decade ago about the 2002 Gujarat riots. 'He has a lawsuit filed against him,' Manoj tells me, because he 'proved that the attacks began with Muslims targeting the Hindus'. 'They don't like to hear the truth', he follows. He tells me doing a Ph.D. is important, that being a professional researcher is 'a real career now'. 'A good career – but it requires a goal, a 'missionary zeal'. In the same breath, he asserts that 'while physical strength, arms, ammunition and resources used to be the path of dominance in the time of hunters and gatherers', it is now about 'strength through ideas'. 'Not everyone', he says, 'is destined for everything' – 'every police officer doesn't become exceptional'. No, he says. We must accept our strengths and stand with pride. He theorizes his and the think tank's mission as requiring a 'missionary zeal', making a difference through the 'strength of ideas'.

This conception of 'zeal', in this case, is powered by a righteousness against a series of conflated others. The 'other' covers vast swathes of time: from British colonisers, to Muslim invaders, to a post-Independence culture of secularism and left-leaning politics. In her study of Thatcherite think tanks in Britain, Radhika Desai⁵¹ too acknowledges the presence of 'zeal' as an affective category. As the most conspicuous psychological characteristic of religious sects on the margins, Desai argues, 'zeal' can be attributed, somewhat dilutedly, to think-tanks founded on the intellectual margins: 'the intensity of belief, its unchanging character...the firm unwavering conviction, the abstraction and ahistoricity, the almost other-worldly belief that, despite counter-evidence, over the long run they will be proved right and a dogged attempt to maintain the purity of their belief'. An interview with a former Director of CI reveals how this zeal gets written as an attempt to 'decolonise' knowledge:

⁵¹ R. Desai, 'Second-hand dealers in ideas: think-tanks and Thatcherite hegemony', *New Left review*, (1994), 27–27.

So what is it that distinguishes one think tank from another? There has to be a certain vision, a bit of ideology, or just an academic interest. You see CI came up only 10 years ago and one need that was felt, was that most think tanks in India did not have an Indian narrative. They had Western narratives, mostly, and Indian narratives coloured heavily by Western narratives. For instance, there was very little focus on what is Indianness, what is Indian culture. We're all ultimately cultural animals. All Indian thinking was all heavily influenced by this intellectual thinking which was developed in the West, so it was felt that we needed to develop an Indian narrative, we must bring in Indian culture. We must have confidence in ourselves, we must not be defensive when we talk about India, Indian culture, and so on. To develop an Indian narrative and to put Nation First - it was not a jingoism, but it is because, see what had happened was that over the years and centuries of colonisation, and all these attacks that happened, India's creativity more or less ended.

This emphasis on an anti-colonial justification drives much of the Hindutva discourse of identity, calling to Chatterjee's conception of the 'thematic' in anti-colonial movements which treats nationhood as an 'essentialist conception based on the distinction between 'the East' and 'the West'⁵². In its current formation within elite organisations like CI, this notion paradoxically tends to replace one socio-cultural elite ostensibly representing the West, with another upper-caste, Hindu elite. The former director demonstrates a key aim of CI: to reframe an 'India First', implicitly Hindu narrative ideology as a righteous quest for self-determination. In many ways, this desire echoes the 'Indian renaissance' mission of Hindu nationalist-sponsored civil society events, such as the Pondicherry Lit Fest in 2018 and 2019. The inaugural theme of this literature festival claimed 'Bharat Shakti' (Indian Strength), following from Sri Aurobindo's declaration to 'turn new eyes on past culture, reawaken to its sense and import, and see it in relation to modern knowledge and ideas' so that 'out of this awakening vision and impulse the Indian renaissance may arise.'⁵³. The 'Indian renaissance' thus combines both cultural and religious elements of Hindutva, yet attempts to separate it from its underlying politics.

While CI and other mimetic intellectual activities emphasize an apolitical, cultural renaissance, India Foundation goes further, calling itself the 'vanguard of politically interventionist think tanks'. Mr. Das, a representative of IF, argues that political parties must develop clear policy ideas. He insists that Indians ended up as 'slaves' to Muslims and the British because they never valued their own set of civilisational political paradigms, and that think tanks like IF can revive a nationalist policy agenda. In our interview, he was open to discussing new ideas 'as long as they are nationalist', reifying a rigidly defined nationalism.

⁵² P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, (Zed Books, 1986), 38.

⁵³ The Pondy Lit Fest, 'The Pondy Lit Fest 2019'.

Toh yaha par koi bhi dikkat nahi hai, agar aapka agenda hai yeh ki aap isliye aaye ho ke aap leftist ho, aur aapka agenda hai ki aap businessman ho, aur aapka agenda yeh hai... Aap bas ek cheez settle karo ki aap kya nationalist ho ya anti-nationalist. Yeh aap hi isko... woh bhi hum argue karne ko taiyaar hai. Par hamare agendas clear ho. Hum to ek aisi society the ki humne kabhi state ko value hi nahi kiya. 1000 saal tak. Tabhi toh we ended up being slaves for 1000 years.

[It's no problem if we have different agendas and different interests - whether you're a leftist, a businessman - all that matters is whether you are a nationalist or an anti-nationalist. We're even ready to argue that! But our agendas need to be clear. Our problem is that our society has never valued our own state - that's why we ended up being slaves for 1000 years [under the Muslims and then the British]]

Here, Mr. Das argues that all communities and groups have interests and ideologies ('agendas') that guide them, but that some of these agendas are more nationalist than others. If we allow anti-nationalist groups to gain political power, he claims, we will effectively end up as slaves to them once again. This rhetoric establishes a form of nationalism that is at once rigid and yet loosely defined, but in the hands of a select few, *proven* nationalists to determine. Mr. Das claims that the political class has abdicated its policy-making responsibility, and allowed so-called 'vested interests', identity politics, and interest groups to influence policy more than they should. With the new ecosystem of BJP's think tanks, he suggests that well-educated people without a political constituency can play a role in politically interventionist policy-making. India Foundation sees the BJP's think tanks as a way for this upper-caste, elite, and nationalist talent to re-enter the policy-politics ecosystem:

Policymaking has completely suffered in this country because those that are responsible for making policy have no accountability for it. They can write anything. ...Now we need to create a class inside the political sphere. In my opinion, we need to create a class within political parties who might optically be a minister, or a politician, but will ensure that the political agenda of the party is pushed. And they will now intervene in policy. And they will take over the political policymaking. You're going to need people who will be able to help you deliver, with ideas, with energy, with capacities, with capabilities. So, that's why it's a good time, it's a good time for folks like us [without constituencies], otherwise, people like us had no chance in this country's role.

Mr. Das, then, occupies a position between the typical Gramscian organic and traditional intellectual. He heads a think tank that works to build intellectual respect for the BJP's policies, yet sees this intellectual work as an active part of political organising. He sees himself as intimately connected to his social class: a cosmopolitan, middle class, upper caste group without grassroots political constituencies, that can bring intellectual legitimacy to 'political policymaking'. Yet, at the same time, he sees 'folks like us' as young, technical,

managerial experts who can bring much needed order to interest-driven political play: thus, he brings both an anti-political and a-political rationalisation to his active Hindutva politics.

His metaphor of Indians being 'slaves' refers to a discourse of long-awaited glory for Hindus. It bleeds in, carries through, and affects the way that people relate to the state and to one another. The BJP has popularised a discourse of 'appeasement' by the former ruling party: claiming that the weak Congress government spent the last seventy years post-Independence 'appeasing' Muslims and minorities with handouts, affirmative action (known as reservations) and preferential treatment. This narrative has taken hold to build resentment, anger, and the Hindu sentiment of long-awaited glory. The claim of universal development then, becomes code for the majority, positing an apolitical inclusion while being deeply political. An interview with a prominent journalist exemplifies this shift from national pride to ethno-centric nationalist aggression:

I think the Hindu self-perception has also changed. Where they were earlier seen as passive guys, who kept getting hit and didn't respond because they were passive or given to quietude. And now they have become very aggressive, and you know, from the time of, I think, Rajiv Gandhi's first slogan '*Mera Bharat Mahan*' [my great India], where Bharat suddenly became masculine. From there it's grown in stages, to today where it became '*Garv se kaho hum Hindu Hai*' [say with pride that we are Hindu]. Can Muslims say 'garv se kaho hum Muslim Hai', you know? To now, where you say, 'whose country is it anyway? It is our country, who are you? This is a civilizational issue'. (Interview with prominent national journalist⁵⁴, April 2019)

The aggression and desire to express a Hindu pride also translates to the realm of dominant forms of knowledge. As the head of another, smaller, BJP-affiliated think tank told me of their work, '[Hindu nationalist intellectuals] are a reaction to the intellectual suppression that took place to that intellectual arrogance that was visible for so many decades [from the left-liberal intellectual elite]'. He continues, however, by saying that this 'liberated' reaction needs to be rigorous, 'academic, measured, and intellectual'. He claims 'We're not like the Marxists that say let's suppress thinking, it's only our line...unlike what they project us to be, we're not that'. There is a clear desire here to assimilate and occupy the ranks of traditional intellectuals, part of which is a projected desire for academic, measured debate. This otherwise anti-political critique of a Marxist-dominated political sphere, however, fails to acknowledge that the BJP administration also relies on actively suppressing voices of dissent emerging from universities, activists, and even people's social media accounts.

Outside the think tank: Outreach and Education

Both India Foundation and Chanakya Institute actively appeal to members of civil society through a range of public events. While CI relies more on mimetic appropriations, such as cultural festivals, book festivals, newspaper articles, television appearances, and lecture

⁵⁴ Anonymous by request

series, IF actively engages with the BJP's mobilisation efforts. By campaigning for Modi in the 2014 national election, India Foundation played a critical role in organising financial and political support for Modi. As the most prosperous minority community in the US, the average Indian-American household earned approximately \$100,000 in 2015, nearly double the US average⁵⁵. In the 2014 and 2019 Indian elections, Hindu nationalist Indian-Americans played a significant role in campaigning for and providing electoral funds to the BJP. As their financial and political influence grows stronger, the diaspora's long distance nationalism⁵⁶ has had a major impact on Indian politics and policy.

Indeed, Modi's spectacular reception in Madison Square Garden in September 2014, merely four months after his initial victory, changed the core paradigm of how the Indian state interacts with its overseas nationals. In the early days of Indian independence, overseas Indians were made to give up their citizenship and treated largely with indifference by the Indian state while facing racism in the US⁵⁷. From the 1970s onwards, Hindu nationalist groups in India began fundraising with the diaspora, appealing to their aligned interests as primarily upper-caste Hindus. The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 led to an increased economic investment in non-citizen Indians, prompting the BJP government to promise them multiple entry visas and commercial rights. However, Prime Minister Modi's aggressive campaigning to the Indian diaspora in recent years is unprecedented in the history of the Indian state. While his rule as the Chief Minister of Gujarat in the early 2000s led to securing business-based networks of support in the US, as Prime Minister, he has harnessed the diaspora as an instrument of projecting India's global strength. As Mr. Das explains below, organising the diaspora became a key form of political interventionism led by India Foundation:

The very fact that he went to White House through Madison Square, that he did Wembley, or that he ran trains in Australia...this is a policy intervention. This is a policy intervention to give you an example where you try to change the way, so today you have a Minister who is thinking of how the Indian embassy can assist the Indian diaspora. Rather than treating them as third-class people who have escaped the country to which the Indian government owes no obligation, which was generally the norm...So I think that's what is needed, that's the kind of work I think tanks affiliated with you politically can do.

⁵⁵ Pew Research Center, *Indians | Data on Asian Americans*, (2017).

⁵⁶ C. Jaffrelot (ed.), *Hindu Nationalism - A Reader*, (Princeton University Press, 2007); A. Bhatt, M. Murty, and P. Ramamurthy, 'Hegemonic developments: the new Indian middle class, gendered subalterns, and diasporic returnees in the event of neoliberalism', *Signs*, 36/1 (2010), 127–52; Therwath, 'Cyber-hindutva: Hindu nationalism, the diaspora and the Web'; J. M. Falcone, 'Putting the "Fun" in Fundamentalism: Religious Nationalism and the Split Self at Hindutva Summer Camps in the United States', *Ethos*, 40/2 (2012), 164–95.

⁵⁷ V. Bald, M. Chatterji, S. Reddy, and M. Vimalassery, *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power*, (NYU Press, 2013).

In September 2019, Modi held a widely publicised rally of more than 50,000 people in Houston, Texas called 'Howdy, Modi'. In an unparalleled PR spectacle, President Trump attended the event and posed for cameras, hand-in-hand with Modi. The Indian Ambassador to the US claimed the event was proof of the 'growing partnership between the world's oldest and largest democracies', and Indian-Americans are the 'organic bridge' between the two. Efforts towards transnational Hindutva are a significant portion of the BJP's think tanks' intellectual efforts. Dhiraj at CI suggested that I read the book 'Being Different'⁵⁸, by Rajiv Malhotra, a US-based Hindu-nationalist author that has provided legitimacy to Hindutva intellectuals, including those at CI. Malhotra's 'breaking India' theory has gained popularity in legitimating the idea that Western forces asserting liberalism and universalism are attempting to disintegrate India's cultural and Hindu unity for their own purposes. Simultaneously, in order for it to appear cutting edge and contemporary, CI has cultivated a number of intellectuals in the US, a group of historians based in Belgium (including the renowned Koenraad Elst), and right-wing intellectuals within India who have affiliations with organisations in the US and Europe. It is primarily this broad-based group of Hindutva intellectuals who are invited to give lectures at the Institute. Senior fellows and researchers based in CI are also often published in mainstream national newspapers (such as Times of India, Indian Express, and Hindustan Times), more niche right-wing online platforms (Swarajya Magazine), as well as appearing in panel discussions on national TV channels, both private and public (Doordarshan, Times Now, Republic TV, to name a few). A few Hindutva publishing houses, such as Voice of India, publish academic works and claim to ideologically defend Hindu public culture.

An interview with a research fellow at the CI revealed their education-driven forms of outreach. Alluding to the organisation's larger lecture events, the interview emphasizes the think tank's focus on outreach, education, raising awareness, and, crucially, an attempt to build nationalism and an attachment to the nation's symbols.

[We host] one of the finest lecture series, and we do interdisciplinary work, get many people together from various disciplines and our halls are absolutely packed. And now we've also started reaching out to students and universities. For example last year we reached out to some 70 schools, and class tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. We wanted young kids to write about 'India of my Dreams'. And it was very good, some essays in Hindi and in English and many of them were Municipality schools, and we had a fantastic interaction - we selected five and interacted with their parents, teachers, students...We get the Chiefs of the Armed Forces, get some schools, get them to shake hands. See, the idea is we must generate good citizens, that's what's most important. Otherwise, we can talk to the converted, which is our standard work, but where there is a certain responsibility of think tanks also to the younger generations.

⁵⁸ R. Malhotra, *Being Different : An Different Challenge To Western Universalism*, (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2013).

The focus he expresses is for the think tank to have a responsibility towards the youth to generate 'good' citizens. 'Good' citizens, here, refers to not only national pride but a specific, upper-caste, Sanskritised version of national pride. An interview with the same research fellow highlighted the particular kind of 'Indianness' that guides their thinking:

When we look at a problem, we try to see it purely from the Indian viewpoint. We try to see, is this a Western narrative that I'm parroting, can I put something of Indianness here. Should I be impressed with a Western report, is there something in our past that relates to this? If you start asking these questions then automatically Indianness comes. Then does it correspond to our cultural diversity, our nation's objectives. Then also the kind of people you bring in. For example, we had a seminar here and we called it *Vasudev Kutubukham* [world is one]. Now nobody has done anything under this theme, and we did it interdisciplinary - we tried to get Sanskrit scholars, historians, we had some people who are experts in scriptures, and tried to look at under this theme: can we build an Indian narrative that is useful for today's problems and issues of the contemporary world.

By trying to delineate a clear division between 'Western' and 'Indian' thinking, and implicitly tying Indian thinking to a history defined by Sanskrit religiosity, the think tanks define rigid boundaries of Indianness. The India Foundation, in this vein, runs the Kautilya Fellows program: a ten day workshop on public policy that primarily attracts science, engineering, and management graduates from regional and national universities. Prominent academics (including Swapan Dasgupta), ministers, and bureaucrats feature on the Academic Council, and the workshop involves a pilgrimage to the Kumbh Mela - the largest Hindu religious congregation in India. The Kautilya Fellowship runs in association with the Ministry of External Affairs, making clear the think tank's entanglement with the state, and bringing Gramsci's idea of the 'integral state'⁵⁹ to life.

As Palshikar has noted, there has long-been a strong constituency within the Hindu middle classes who have found appeal in Hindutva rhetoric, even if public intellectual consensus in the past discouraged it⁶⁰. Indeed, the recruitment of retired diplomats, administrative and military officers into the BJP's think tanks suggests that the Indian state system holds a reserve of officers with Hindutva leanings who, after retirement, see their relationship with the think tanks as a continuation of the agendas that they were pursuing while in service. What has changed in particular is the extent to which they are able to assert their opinions in the form of analysis⁶¹. Several of CI's articles, for example, use considerable expository space to set up their narratives of oppositional politics, creating reductive analyses of how the 'mainstream media', 'skeptical commentators', leftists, Marxists, and a broad camp of critics approach the BJP, Hinduism, and Modi. Structurally, their articles proceed by first setting up

⁵⁹ Humphrys, 'Anti-politics, the early Marx and Gramsci's 'integral state'.

⁶⁰ Palshikar, 'Politics in the Times of Hegemony'.

⁶¹ L. Tribe, 'Policy Science: Analysis or Ideology?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, (1972).

their oppositional discourse, and then moving to 'reason' through rational or statistical means a way out of it, glibly dismissing the magnitude or validity of this opposition and in many cases representing it as illogical, divisive, or gratuitously 'fashionable'. For example, in an article on the media's inability to fathom Modi, an author affiliated with the CI notes:

One of the prime reasons for this is the deep-seated prejudice and even hatred for the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi and the BJP among commentators and the unwillingness to go beyond the moth-eaten script that sees everything through the prism of so-called secularism and Hindu communalism...Therefore, it is fashionable to be Nehruvian or left-leaning. Those who do not conform to these two schools are to be treated as pariahs.

Many of their publications invariably have a section that dismisses left-liberal thought as a product of a colonised mind, primarily seeking to present a reductive narrative of it. Indeed, as Van Dijk has pointed out, a key attribute of ideological discourse is to 'attribute ideologies only to others and 'truth' to ourselves'⁶². In another published pamphlet called 'Policies and Perspectives', arguments against appointing Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister of India's largest state due to his inflammatory anti-Muslim comments are forgiven as 'keeping with his firebrand image'. The author then appeals to the reader to understand that Adityanath is not opposed to any particular religious group, but any group that speaks and works against the country..

Incidentally, he had sought to set the record straight during election campaigning itself, when he stated that he wasn't opposed to any particular religious group, but to those who spoke and worked against the country. This cannot be held against him, surely.

Through their lecture series, educational outreach programs, and publications, the CI attempts to not only reach high-level government officials, but also to build an alternative intellectual space: through the public at large and, specifically, by targeting schools and educational institutions.

Apolitical/Political/Anti-political

As a revolving door, both CI and IF occupy a middle rung between the upper echelons of government bureaucracy, and the roots of the BJP and the RSS leadership. As such, their primary success is not about their published reports, but a consolidation of networks across religious, political, and military fields. The research fellows affiliated to both the IF and CI have a fair amount of individual prestige based on their own political, administrative, or military background, and are able to disseminate the organisation's research widely through TV panel discussions, interviews, lectures, and newspaper articles. Through these channels, the CI disseminates hybridized discourses of Hindutva and national policy not explicitly, but

⁶² Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse analysis', 132.

implicitly: through coding Hindu superiority as national interest, rewriting ethno-centric ideology as 'protecting India's unity', and defining Indianness and nationhood through a superior and ancient Hindu past. Indeed, the former Director of CI expressed this desire to equate CI's mission as a path towards an 'Indianness' for all:

You see, these ideas are for everyone. After all, everybody's an Indian, everybody's a citizen - this isn't about politics. It is very easy, after one or two conversations, iterations, we all talk along the same lines. Anyway, we don't have enough people who know about these things, we still have to build it.

In claiming the organisation and himself, he is adopting an assumed objective neutrality. This pretension of neutrality feeds into developing a commonsensical understanding of what it means to be a moral Indian and nationalist: one that draws on a nationalism delimited by a Hindu, specifically Sanskrit and upper-caste, legacy. On the other hand, in perhaps the most explicit statement of the India Foundation's politically affiliated mandate, the General Secretary of the BJP and head of the think tank, Ram Madhav, actively speaks to using the think tank to build consensus for the BJP's ideological and political beliefs:

What the party thinks can be supported by the think tank by way of its own research, its own activities, its own conferences. For example today, the party and government think of One Nation, One Election. Through the think tank we can do work, we produce papers on that, we do conferences on that. Things like that. Party policies, government policies, they can be taken to an intellectual level, and presented to an intellectual audience, and in the process also benefit your speakers, your in-house intellectuals in the party. That work we do.

Here, Ram Madhav acknowledges that part of India Foundation's key role is to produce research and organise conferences and external events that affirms the BJP's policy ideas in a broader, authoritative setting. They take the party and the government's policies to an 'intellectual level' and deliver it to a widespread policy making and intellectual audience.

Conclusion

Part of the CI's and IF's project has been to construct new markers of intellectual achievement. By claiming that higher education has been run down by left-wing politics and ideology, they attempt to build a counter-narrative to left-liberal intellectualism. They confess to being ideological only in their crusade for nation-building and national unity, but at the same time, believe this to be not necessarily ideology, but moral common sense. At the same time, they are caught in the double-sidedness of their mission: between the apolitical, cultural facets of the organisation and its more overtly stated political partisanship. As Hodge⁶³ notes,

⁶³ Hodge, 'Ideology, Identity, Interaction: Contradictions and Challenges for Critical Discourse Analysis'.

in acknowledging these ideological contradictions I am potentially contradicting myself. While this paper demonstrates Hindutva's contradictions as a strength, at times it also suggests it as a tension indicating its fissures, or fault lines. Yet these contradictions are neither inherently good or bad. They become a strength, or a weakness in terms of how they are managed. Within the think tanks, I argue that these contradictions become a strength and serve towards a generalised ethos of Hindu majoritarianism.

As forms of 'soft Hindutva'⁶⁴, the BJP-affiliated think tanks I have examined in this article try to foster two kinds of political and anti-political spaces: first, by actively 'grooming' future BJP politicians, and second, by actively producing and educating portions of civil society to adopt a normalised, diffused form of a neo-Hindutva. Through CI, it is perhaps important to revisit Reddy's⁶⁵ call to pay attention to the apolitical manifestations of Hindutva's anti-politics. While, in this case, CI does retain informal ties with the BJP-RSS network, many of the researchers within it see themselves as apolitically enacting formal academic research. This recognition ought not to be dismissed as mere rhetoric, as Hindutva crucially derives strength from constructing an imaginary that positions itself outside of the petty corruptions of Indian politics. This active experience of apolitical Hindutva is one of its most effective tools of resonance: it makes itself both visible and yet adapts itself into something banal.

⁶⁴ Anderson, "Neo-Hindutva": the Asia House MF Husain campaign and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Britain'.

⁶⁵ Reddy, 'What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?'.