

THE BODY OF INDIA: GEOGRAPHY, RITUAL, NATION

Jackie Assayag

Este texto centra-se na construção do “corpo” geopolítico e simbólico da nação indiana em três grandes períodos: o *raj* britânico, o movimento que precede e se segue à independência, em 1947, e os tempos controversos e convulsos iniciados nos anos 80.

Em cada um destes momentos foram vários os recursos que permitiram conceptualizar a imaginação do corpo da Índia — a cartografia imperial britânica, a centralidade da vaca e o *rāmraj* (o reino do deus hindu Rāma, avatar de Viṣṇu). Na actualidade esses recursos, mais do que postularem a integridade do corpo simbólico da Índia, são objecto de apropriações que, no quadro dos actuais conflitos que atravessam o subcontinente indiano, remetem para expressões de um inquietante integralismo hindu.

“The body is the first and most natural of man’s instruments.”

M. MAUSS, “Les Techniques du corps” (1936),
in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, PUF, 1960: 372.

1947. This date refers to one of the most dramatic moments in the history of South Asia. Its political expression was the marking out of new borders in Hindustan: on the one hand, between India and Pakistan; on the other, between Hindus and Muslims on the subcontinent. An excerpt from a work by *pandit* Jawaharalal Nehru, *Independence and After*, echoes the consequences of this event:

All your communications were upset and broken. Telegraphs, telephones, postal services and almost everything, as a matter of fact, was disrupted. Our services were broken up. Our army was broken up. Our irrigation systems were broken up and so many other things happened. But above all, what was broken up which was the highest importance was something very vital and that was the body of India¹.

The body of India. Birth of a nation, or rather, of two nations, contemporaneous with a formidable transfer of hundreds of thousands of their members and by a particularly bloody loss of their populations. Violent images present themselves: division, separation, amputation, dismemberment, carving up, vivisection. An obscure, brutal aspect of the struggle for freedom and accession to independence. A film production by Mani Ratnam, which had an enormous success in 1994, tells of it again synecdochally². The film relates the dramatic odyssey of twin brothers, sons of Hindu-Muslim mixed parentage, at the time of the communal conflict which ravaged Bombay in 1993. One twin was named Kabir Narayanan, and the other, Kamal Baksha.

The integrity of the body of India is a source of constant concern (Krishna 1994). A regular reading of the Indian press reveals a haunting fear of national disintegration

¹ The complete title is: *Independence and After: A Collection of Speeches 1946-1949*, 1956: 247.

² It is a question of the now famous film *Bombay*, which was banned from showing in Maharashtra, in particular because it caricatured Bal Thackeray, the president of the Shiv Sena. The Muslims were just as discontent: they demonstrated against its distribution, but for other reasons. Maharashtra, which is the most industrialised state in India, is today governed by the Hindu nationalist alliance BJP-RSS.

under pressures both internal and external. On the one hand, there are the demands of states, regions, castes or of secessionist movements; during elections every political party asserts its capability to guarantee territorial integrity and national unity, decrying among its rivals a tendency towards balkanisation. On the other hand, there is the intervention of the “foreign hand” which threatens to destabilise the country. Hence, the fear of infiltration or violation of boundaries and recurrent appeals to the lines of demarcation, barbed-wire barriers, security belts, or to the strengthening of surveillance at the borders and in proximity to the coast.

This obsidional perception is, of course, not without grounds. South Asia is one of the Asian entities in which the frontiers were most extensively reshaped since the nineteenth century. The western boundary has remained a veritable front line since 1947. Apart from the rivalry with China, three lines of tension subsist, namely with Bangladesh, Pakistan and on the borders of Afghanistan (Foucher 1991: 322). Viewing matters over a long period of time, one would be led to think that the leaders of India do not accept without ill-feeling Pakistan’s independence, and that they consider the subcontinent, from Durand to Burma, from the margins of Tibet to Sri Lanka, as their domain of interest. This points to internal tensions which paralyse exchanges between the seven countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

A constant theme in the campaigns embarked upon and conducted by radical activists at the time of partition was: the land of Lord Rama has been shamefully dismembered. But, the thematic is old, as Sheldon Pollock has affirmed (1993). Since the twelfth century, the *Rāmāyana* has been interpreted in North India as a “protocommunist” text³; envisaged was the deification of the king through the demonisation of the Central Asian invaders. Many still consider the borders between India and Pakistan to be the result of an Anglo-Muslim conspiracy. However, the Muslim-Other has become forever the transgressor of sacred integrity, whereas the British-Other remains the foreigner. The boundary division is connected with desacralisation⁴, a violation of the land which the Hindus readily personify as *Mother India* — title of a celebrated allegorical poem by Bankim Chandra Chatterji, a Bengali writer of the second half of the nineteenth century. The text was, and continues to be, controversial because it identifies India with a venerated goddess, an association held by the Muslims to be idolatrous, and thus unacceptable. Proof, for the Hindus, that the people of Mohammed do not recognise the legality of the Indian motherland, *Bande Mātaram*.

Modern India is haunted by an idea of sacrifice which entails the sense of scapegoat: the sovereignty of its political body was born of the dismemberment of the original motherland by “foreigners” (*mleccha, yavana*)⁵ — a motherland which corresponds

³ I use the word “communal” in its Anglo-Indian sense (and not the Anglo-American) which designates an exclusive attachment to one’s community combined with an active hostility towards one or more communities which share one’s geographical and/or political space. For an exposition of this type of conflict, its magnitude and its characteristics on the basis of case analyses, refer to A. A. Engineer (1985). On the other hand, the work of J. Assayag (1996) endeavours to show the complexity of relations between Hindus and Muslims *in situ*, in routine life and at the time of festivals.

⁴ A passage from an article by A. Varshney underlines the specificity of the problem in South Asia: “Politics based on this imagination [of “partition”] is quite different from what was seen when Malaysia and Singapore split from each other, or when the Czech and Slovak republics separated. Territory not being such an inalienable part of their natural identity, these territorial divorces were not desecrations. In India, they become desecrations of the sacred geography” (1993: 231).

⁵ The Indian “xenologic” tradition is commendably explored by Halbfass (1988: chap. 11).

grosso modo to the old boundaries of the British colonial empire. A consideration of the body of India calls attention to three key periods in its formation. During the first, between 1750 and 1830, the political technology of the Raj regrouped Indian territory cartographically. In the second, the construction of a Hindu identity, communalism and the growth of the independence movement converged around the metaphor of the cow, emotional symbol of the nation. Beginning in the 1980s, the third major period has witnessed the endeavour to conquer the State through the ballot-boxes by proposing to realise the *hindutva* kingdom. The two latter phases are accompanied by a series of ritual innovations which foster religious nationalism and xenophobic violence⁶. Cartography, cow, *Rāmraṅ*; territory, nation, State: such is the geo-political genealogy of India which we shall now consider.

The colonial cartography of the body of India

Understood in the “Westphalian” sense of territory — from the name of the treaty which opened a new era in international relations in the seventeenth century —, India is a contingent historical construction, the origin of which goes back to the late eighteenth century. Evidence of this is provided by the immense production of British colonial archives, accumulated in the course of the conquest of Hindustan. The historical aspects of this enterprise have been thoroughly studied. Rarely however, has attention been directed to its geographic dimension, that is to say, to the effort which oversaw the cartography of Indian territory.

The spatial representation of what was to become India is the product of the cadastral technology applied by the colonial State. With the domination of Bengal, in 1765, which made the Honourable Company one of the principal territorial powers on the subcontinent, the first piece of a future empire was put in place. Administration of the growing empire soon required physically defined territories, stable and clearly demarcated boundaries supporting and framing localised communities which were liable to fall into *ad hoc* classification. The demarcation of spaces, or of social groups with long-standing attachment to the land, made it possible to evaluate military needs and authorised the imposition of taxes; an initial phase before improving the circulation of goods and the control of men from centres of administrative decision with well-established authority. The fundamental division in British geopolitics was the administrative unit, the principle of the subdivision of space to the purpose of organisation. Cartography advanced with the military: army and naval officers were the first to collect and provide material for programmes of agrarian organisation and land taxation plans, for the establishment of administrative zones and the codification of the rights of the people (Bayly 1988: 87).

Regardless of how little interventionist “indirect rule” may have been, territorial administration raised the question of the management of populations whose destinies

⁶ As concerns the political, ideological and institutional history of Hindu nationalism, one may refer to the work of Jaffrelot (1992) and, regarding Hindu and Muslim religious nationalism, Van der Veer (1994). As pertains to violence and xenophobia, *vide* Das (1990) and Kakar (1995).

were to be regulated on the basis of a process of (western) civilisation respectful of the customs of new subjects. Nascent scientific cartography, in addition to the application of a political economy which inspired triumphant utilitarianism (Stokes 1959), became the instrument for controlling the populations and for allocating resources through the medium of land. The venture to seize territory in a manner both panoptic and hegemonic brought about changes in the fluid conception of boundaries and the heterogeneous conception of spaces and sites which had until then prevailed. Behind the cartographic techniques, with their patience, meticulousness, accuracy, and the perspective which characterised them, a political ambition stands out which progressively exacerbated imperial ideology.

The fascination of orientalist administrators for “Brahminism” and the scriptures of ancient India was followed, in the 1770s, by a preoccupation with social statistics which was also prevalent in the home country.

The statistics enabled the quantification of goods and people, the tabulation of groups and communities, most often according to Linnaean classification. The greatest topographer, Buchanan, was a medical doctor by profession and botanist by training (Vicziány 1986). The territorial grid, providing a support for the political order and a frame for the allegiance of power, classified two hundred million inhabitants on the basis of racial or social categories, registering them in the course of the formation of a sovereign nation-state. Surveying of land, measuring, the holding of inquiries, investigation, classification, control, management, administration, and penalisation inaugurated a new manner of governing learnt from a calculating rationality (Appadurai 1994). Fear of the French Revolution, above all of the propagation of its ideals, imposed the implementation of new and more rational instruments of control and surveillance in Hindustan; all the more so, because the economic jewel of Hindustan was only a part of the great imperial meridian (Bayly 1989: chap. V).

Topographic and trigonometric investigations and revenue surveys were conducted in most regions of the country during the nineteenth century. It was a matter of mapping India, in terms of relief as well as of fields, villages and towns, on both regional and continental levels. Beginning in 1830, maps for various purposes were produced in ever greater numbers. There was, for example, the booklet containing five maps of India by Parbury and Allen which, as its sub-title indicated, was “illustrative of the European connection with India and the British administration in its several departments”. Classified in their order, these consisted of: a both general and commercial map; a political map, the states including chronological tables; a military map, indicating stations occupied by troops; another concerning revenues, indicating districts (but not roads) and a few place-names; and, a fifth map of a judicial nature (Kalpagam 1995).

The first modern map of India, drawn by the Frenchman d’Anville, dates from 1751-1752 and was based on the routes known to travellers. However, the most celebrated is indisputably that by James Rennell (1742-1830) who, with his *Map of Hindoostan* (1788), presented for the first time a comprehensive view of India, on four separate sheets which could be arranged together. Having been first given responsibility for surveying the harbours on the Bay of Bengal for the Royal Navy, in 1763, Rennell was named the following year Surveyor General of Bengal. He published the *Bengal Atlas* in 1779. The first edition of his map of Hindustan, dated 1781, was dedicated to the greatest of the colo-

nial authorities: Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, Hector Munro, etc. The preliminary sketches served the historian Orme for his three-volume *History of Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan* (1745-1760), which appeared in 1763. Rennell revised his atlas up to the year 1793, because, as he explained in his preface, facts, keeping pace with the expansion of the Company's power, accumulated too rapidly. Commercial enterprise was, in effect, militarised between 1780 and 1830 (Bayly 1988: 84ff). As Rennell himself remarked, in the factual tone frequently assumed in colonial discourse, such a cartographic project renders the world (India) visible and usable by and for the enterprise of conquest. Technical progress in geography constituted an essential element in colonial awareness and judgment. By means of the array of maps prepared in the four corners of the empire, the colonial world became accessible to scholars and merchants. Members of these two groups were to conjointly transform the world as it was into a unified country. Scholars contributed to this transformation by "visualising" a territory whose codified grid marked the end of an era of exploration⁷; merchants, by organising the material appropriation of mercantile capitalism.

This idea is ritualised allegorically in the lithograph embellishing Rennell's map. It shows surveying and cartographic instruments on the ground at the feet of Europeans in civilian clothes — a geographer and a merchant — who stand in the shadow of a goddess with helmet and in arms, no other than Britannia. Somewhat above and behind her is the imperial lion, one paw resting on the globe. The Athena of Albion is receiving from the hands of a bowing Brahmin (there are three pictured in the engraving) the "Shastras", the book of Hindu law (Ludden 1992: 254-255). The exchange of customary services is in reality asymmetric. The gift of a map was motivated, as has been mentioned, by a scholarly project in the service of a predatory economy — one distinguishes in the background of the lithograph a ploughman at work and dockers lading a commercial vessel. The offering of Hindu law reflects the will of the Company to make use of local Brahman experts. In fact, according to a decision taken by Warren Hastings, first Governor-General of India, in 1773:

In all suits regarding inheritance, Marriage, Caste, and all other religious Usages or Institutions, the laws of the Koran with respect to the Mahometans, and those of the Shaster with respect to the Gentoos, shall be invariably adhered to....

It was, therefore, in accordance with local customary practices, the principle of which was maintained in the Act of Settlement of 1781, that he confided to Nathaniel Brassey Halhed the creation of distinct bodies of civil laws for Hindus and Muslims. In 1776, Halhed published his translation (on the basis) of the *Dharmasastras* under the title, *Code of Gentoo Law, or Ordinations of the Pundits, from the Persian Translation Made from the Original, Written in the Shanscrit Language*. In 1788, at the request of Charles Cornwallis, second Governor-General of India, the famous orientalist Sir William Jones, began in his turn to work with the assistance of *pandits* and of *maulvi*-s. His compilation of texts translated from the Persian and entitled *Digest of Hindu and Mohamadan Laws*, was published after his death by his student Henri Thomas Colebrook, in 1789 (Cohn 1987).

⁷ James Rennell later prepared the maps for the journal of Mungo Park's African expedition, which became a best-seller (Ludden 1994: 258).

The formation of the geographic body of India was thus contemporaneous with a separate civil law for each community. The law itself was founded on a historiographic concept which viewed the succession of Hindu, Muslim and British Indias in terms of the evolutionary scheme systematised by James Mill in 1820 (Majeed 1990). However, progress in the cartographic representation of the empire did not of itself ensure the transition to a linear concept of boundaries, that is, of the contours of the whole perceived as having homogeneous elements and cohesion. When all is said and done, it is the way in which the rulers and subjects view their community, their territory and its history, which lends unity of meaning to the geographic entity in which they live. This is an extensive question involving the establishment of national sentiment.

The nationalist construction around the body of the cow

Nations, as has been repeatedly said since the publication of the work by B. Anderson (1991), are “imaginary communities”. The production of cultural meanings and social practices fosters the historical formation of national identities. And, religion is one of the principal purveyors in this construction. This observation is verified in India by the image of the cow, both symbol and embodied reality of the nation in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was, in fact, around this powerful unifying icon that an aspect of the ideology of the Hindu community was consolidated in its opposition to the Other (the Muslims). For, “Hindus revere the cow, whereas Muslims eat it” (Robinson 1974: 13). Worse, the latter are butchers by profession and sacrifice (*qurbānī*) cows at the time of certain religious festivals, namely during *Bakhr-Īd*, which commemorates the sacrifice made by Abraham.

The cow, of course, has been a constitutive symbol of Hindu identity for a long time. That this animal was held to be sacred was recognised in the pre-colonial period, sacred also to Muslims: medieval sultans such as Zainul Abidin of Kashmir, or Zahiruddin Babur, the founder of the Moghul empire, placed a ban on its slaughter (Hasan 1991: 216). Conversely, clashes subsequent to the slaughtering of cows were not unknown, at least since the sixteenth century (Pandey 1983: 79). But, the practice became a subject of serious controversy and conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the 1880s. The protection of the “mother cow”, *gomātā*, a rallying symbol for mobilising the Hindu community, continued to be a major problem for Hindu nationalism, at least until 1920 (Robb 1986).

The first registered society for the protection of the cow (*Gorakṣinī Sabhā*) was founded in 1882 by Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), the founder of the Arya Samaj, the “society of *ārya-s*”. The previous year, he had published a tract entitled *Gokarunānidhi* (“Ocean of benedictions to the cow”) in which he defended the idea that the slaughter of cows was anti-Hindu. He took his militant pilgrim’s staff to propagate this teaching throughout India, using modern means of transport and communications. Within the framework of his reform (neo-)Hinduism, advocating the regeneration of Vedic civilisation which embraces the territory of the *Aryavarta*, the first land to have emerged from the ocean⁸, his objective was to re-integrate the Hindu family into the body of the cow

⁸ The notion that Tibet, and more generally the Himalayas, would be the birth-place of the Aryan race, was without doubt prompted by Dayananda Saraswati’s reading of British writers, as this idea is to be first found among European philosophers, notably Kant and Herder (Poliakov 1987: 210-213). For a genealogy of the theory of the Aryans as applied in India by the British, *vide* J. Leopold (1974).

by rallying the minor *rājās*, lords of men, of cattle and of territories. It is, in fact, by the protection accorded to the cow that one can recognise a just kingdom, in good health and prosperous.

The relation thus established between family and nation defines yet today the conservative concept of the fundamentalist *hindutva* movement. The cow, image of the female body, is the paradigm of a strictly patriarchal matrimony conceived on the model of the divine couple Rāma and Sītā. Rāma is the ideal husband, virtuous king and guardian of the social order; Sītā is the symbol of loyal submission to the husband (*pativrata*) who protects her and whose family she nourishes, ready to follow him to the funeral pyre as a *sati*. The opposition between gender categories is a political relation. To sacrifice a cow is to violate the (interrelated) conjugal, family, patriarchal and national orders.

Societies for the protection of the cow rapidly branched out to Bengal, the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra and, more diffusedly, over almost the entire subcontinent, including Burma. Comprised of very active pressure groups in the North, they demanded of the colonial government the banning of slaughter. In 1886, the movement intensified dramatically when the Allahabad High Court ruled that the cow was not a sacred "object", in conformity with Article 295 of the Indian penal code. This signified that Muslims and British were simply considered as meat-eaters and not as barbarians! The denial of sanctity radicalised the activists of the movement, who then attempted to physically oppose slaughter. Thus, the conflict pitted Hindus against British, but above all, Hindus against Muslims (as well as against Christians [Freitag 1990: 151]). Violent and bloody clashes occurred in Bojpuri in 1893, in Ayodhya in 1913, and in the district of Shahabad in 1917 (Pandey 1983).

It would be a misinterpretation to reduce the cow to a mere symbol, however emotionally charged it may be. The movement for cow protection corresponds to a mobilisation which reflects a multiplicity of interests, both economic and political. It covers a diversity of urban and rural actors: maharajas or minor government officials, large landowners or landless peasants, traditionalists, reformists or agitators for independence. Its development responds to the need for unity of a Hindu community, which its new organisers find excessively fragmented. They are also at the origin of ritual innovations linked to the foundation of an organisational framework intended for the expression of (Hindu) sanctity in the public space of society (Yang 1980). Most of the time, it is constructed at the expense of the Muslim scapegoat. Thus, in the district of Azamgarh, in the 1890s, the organisers of a gathering of 6000 persons had circulated the imposing image of a cow, the body of which contained (nearly) all the gods of Hinduism. Placing various ritual implements before this image, the sacrificer exhorted the participants to protect the cow. Everyone present received a little milk, but only after a calf had been satisfied. After the milk had been drunk, the cow was solemnly proclaimed "Universal Mother". It was declared that the killer of a cow was a matricide. A new image reinforced this idea: it represented a cow flanked by a Muslim drawing a sword. To the purpose of preventing such "matricides", the participants founded an association (*sabhā*), adopted common rules, elected officials and chose a prestigious leader. The maharajas presided over organisations of this type which could extend over vast networks. The symbol was capable of linking agrarian and urban imaginations. Another example: the Rani of Majhauhi had eighty heads of decapitated cows to be bought and then carried

in procession through the town by Muslim butchers recruited for the occasion (Freitag 1990: 152-153).

An exploration of the blending of the image of the cow and the concept of nation calls for an explanation of the extraordinary proliferation of meanings and associations which have been linked with the cow in Indian civilisation for ages. Without wanting to develop here a well-known symbolism, one should nevertheless recall how the sanctity of the body of the cow, the prohibition on killing or eating its meat, has made the question of its flesh vitally important in the organisation of society. Meat par excellence, it regulates the due portions of commensality on the hierarchic model and the principle of stigmatisation.

This veneration is connected with the idea that the human body depends entirely on the cow, as a child depends on its mother. The animal is a symbol of nourishment and, therefore, a symbol of the earth. This power is not only attached to the cow itself, but also to its products, so many substances associated with life and which play an important role in rituals. Daily milk is more than nutritious and milk products are food which will make pure (*sāttvik*). The mixture of the five products (*pañcagavya*), milk, yoghurt, butter, urine, dung, is highly valued in rituals, in particular those of expiation.

This adulation also reflects other forms of devotion (*bhakti*). Myths centred on Kṛṣṇa, the child who grew up in a pastoral environment, and the young lover surrounded by cowherdresses (*gopī-s*), are well-known. Adulation is also expressed for the goddess, mother of life and substance of all things, who satisfies all desires (*kāmadhenu*), who vouches for wealth and favours prosperity (*lakṣmī*). In her malevolent and unmarried form, she is no less venerated and similarly called "Mother". Kālī and Durgā were, moreover, frequently invoked at gatherings for cow protection. When Hindu society is under threat, the goddess assumes a terrible aspect to combat the attacking demons. When a cow is killed, a crime equivalent to the murder of a Brahman, Durgi, armed and astride her tiger, demands bloody sacrifices.

The iconography of Hindu nationalism has made abundant use of this ambivalent archetype of the mother; nourishing cow and destroying goddess. The symbol of the cow was constantly employed in the struggle for independence (McLane 1977) to symbolize the body of India sucked by the British colonial power. Thus, since its foundation in 1885, but not without internal debate regarding the danger of division of united Hindu-Muslim action in the anti-British struggle (Brown 1984: 179), the Congress Party associated itself with the movement for cow protection. It profited from its fund-collecting network which also made the circulation of information, pamphlets and other "snowball" (*patia*) propaganda letters possible in all corners of the country (Pandey 1983: 90-91; 109 ff). In Maharashtra, for example, B. G. Tilak, member of the independence movement, accorded an essential place to the cow symbol in the celebration of the regional hero, Shivaji, and played a determining role in the activities of the Society for Cow Protection in the town of Poona. The golden legend of the "freedom fighters" in the resistance struggle against the occupying power has for a long time eclipsed the common source of inspiration of several nationalist themes among communalist organisations and the independence movement.

In the decade 1930-1940, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi utilised the image of devotion to the cow to foster his dream of an independent and autonomous India; the image of the calf attached to its mother symbolised the relation of Indians to the nation, most particularly his own. He presided over conferences on cow protection in Belgaum (in Karnataka), participated in meetings in Delhi and Bombay, worked on a charter, saying, "I keep all the time thinking of it and also discuss it" (quoted by Hasan 1991: 219). The Gandhian genius consisted in embodying this devotion, conceptualised as feminine and non-violent (*ahimsā*), but having passive resistance as a weapon in the fight against the emasculation of the nation under colonial domination. The Mahātmā thought, in fact, that he possessed a feminine power (*śakti*) over events, a power acquired through celibacy (*brahmacarya*), and by adopting a model of renunciation (*sannyāsin*) which involved the retention of the semen by means of meditative heat (*tapas*) (Brown 1990: 282 ff). The purpose of this rigorous bodily discipline — experimenting with left-handed Tantra which uses the female body as an instrument to attain a dimension of higher self — was in part to lend the nationalist leader greater strength. At the worst period of bloody conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, the Mahātmā attempted to further enhance his power by sleeping beside naked young girls, thus measuring his detachment from the world — real-life experimentation with the recurrent Sivaite mythological motif of the seduction of the ascetic by a courtesane (O'Flaherty 1973).

It was against this sublimation into the service of the holy idea of the nation that his assassin, Nathuram Godse — who, on the contrary, was nurtured on Maratha martial ideology — declared: "I firmly believed that the teaching of absolute ahimsa as advocated by Gandhiji would ultimately result in the emasculation of the Hindu Community..." (Mehta 1977: 175-176). This man was a militant of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Association of National Volunteers, founded in 1925. The organicist ideology of this party is based on the *aṅgāṅgibhāva* doctrine, limb-body relations, which postulates a hierarchy: individual (*vyakti*)-society (*samāj*) / family (*parivār*)-nature (*prakṛti*)-divinity (*paramātma*). That is to say, man can only attain god through reverence for "family-society" and nature (Basu *et al.* 1993: 32). Based on this concept, the organisation is structured in numerous sectarian units, called *śakhās* (branches), following the example of monasteries of combatant ascetics (*akhāras*), which constitute a network of brotherhoods (Andersen & Damle 1987). In each of them, gymnastics and martial exercises, inspired by the traditional Indian wrestler, that "meeting of muscles and morals" (Alter 1992: 17), together with mental discipline, in this case characteristic of renunciants, train the disciples (*śiṣyas*) under the guidance of a venerated master (*guru*). Duty to the familial community, of which the guru embodies the father, is primary. The model is patriarchal and reactionary: it is a question of refuting the Hindu intelligentsia, who are feeble and effeminate (Nandy 1983: 4-11). This is an obsession and an historical explanatory principle for M. S. Gowalkar: "The sudden and total collapse of France [à propos of 1914] was due to effeminacy which had sapped the energy of the heroic manhood in France" (quoted by Pandey 1993: 263). Contrariwise, the militant bodies work at the militarisation (or "kshatriyation") of the members of society and are ideally integrated in the body of *dharma*.

Some fifty years later, there still exists a department for cow protection in the organisation chart of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Universal Hindu Associa-

tion, one of the components of the *hindutva* movement⁹. Led by Paramanand Mittal, it continues the old tradition of “cowsheds” (*go-sthalas*), but functions with greater willingness as a dispensary of agitation, for example, against the free sale of beef in Kerala or Bengal. Its activity draws inspiration from an idea as simple as it is radical: “It is the duty of Hindus to kill Muslims who kill cows”. This slogan could be read *ad nauseum* on the walls of Ayodhya and Faizabad in 1990¹⁰.

More recently, in November 1995, in view of the weak response to the activities conducted by the *hindutva* movement in the towns of Kashi and Mathura, the VHP, under the direction of Ashok Singhal, decided to revive the slogan of cow protection, no doubt remembering the electoral success of the Jan Sangh (JS), Union of the People, in 1976, notably in Uttar Pradesh, which was attributed to a large extent to the emotion provoked by an anti-slaughter agitation launched the previous year. Today, the VHP has produced a video cassette which extols the importance of the animal and castigates the menace hanging over it. To this purpose, the film reveals religious, social, economic and environmental dimensions of the central government’s export policy regarding cow meat. The government is accused of wanting to increase therefold the expected revenue (from thirty million to one hundred million rupees). To introduce the documentary, a branch of the VHP, the Bharatiya Govansh Rakshan Samvardahan Parishad, organised a conference bringing scientists and other experts together who explained why cow protection was of vital importance and elucidated the reasons which would make the closure of abattoirs necessary. A census of all such establishments in the country was taken and the list was circulated. The Bajrang Dal (BD), an activist movement of nationalist RSS youth for which the muscular monkey god, Hanuman, is the eponym, planned a rally. More than a hundred jeeps, called “cow protection chariots” (*go-rakṣ-rath-s*), traversed six hundred districts of the peninsula. For its part, the RSS promised to join the agitation, the high point of which was reached in January 1996. One of its organisations, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, already an outpost in the struggle against the installation of the American power plant, Enron, in Maharashtra, decided to undertake, on 15 November, a “pilgrimage on foot” (*pādayātrā*) from the town of Sevagram, near Nagpur, to AI-Kaveer in the district of Medak, Andhra Pradesh, to protest against the industrial abattoirs established there. The head of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)¹¹, L. K. Advani, joined the march which reached its destination on 6 December, the anniversary of the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya (1992). The aim of the Bajrang Dal members is to “free cows from the abattoirs”, whatever the human cost (*Indian Express*, 10/11/95). It is foreseen to assemble ten million activists on 14 January 1996 at Sangam, at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers (and the mythic Saraswati), so as to take an oath to obtain, by any means, a ban on slaughter. This vow is similar to that taken by *sadhus* on the banks of the Saryu

⁹ The very vague political programme of the VHP is inspired by two treatises, the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Manusmṛti*. The first defines a highly organised surveillance system of the monarchic type and under meddlesome bureaucratic control. The second treatise elucidates the manner of governing well, that is in particular, how to ensure domination over *Sudras* and women (Basu *et al.* 1993: 78).

¹⁰ An article by Pandey (1993) provides a compilation, with commentaries, of some of the anti-Muslim slogans which are extensively propagated on the subcontinent.

¹¹ Y. K. Malik and V. B. Singh (1995) trace the history of the development of this nationalist party, from its roots in the RSS and Jana Sangh.

River to demolish the Babri Masjid. This is the only way to quell “the stream of blood which flows in every river of India, where there is no longer any place to perform religious rites”, said Ashok Singhal, on 20 October in Nagpur. He estimated that the “masacre” would amount to more than 50 000 cows yearly (*India Today*, 15/11/95).

Ritual, territory and nation

Sacred geography and god of the microcosm

The development of the idea of the *Hindu Rāj* is linked to a dramatised undertaking to re-map the Indian subcontinent, a cartography based on two correlated concepts of the country. One of these concepts refers to the physical geography of Mother India, immemorial motherland of the Hindus; the other, to the sacred geography of the land of India, traversed by pilgrimage routes, covered with religious centres and places consecrated to several chosen deities of the Hindu pantheon. So many passages or places where events have taken place which can scarcely be qualified as mythological, as they have today acquired, with the complicity of a few of Clío’s mercenaries, an historic reality. Rāma was born 900 000 years ago in Ayodhya, very precisely at the present location called ‘Sri Ram Janmabhūmi. He was reincarnated in 1949, when his effigy suddenly appeared at the site destined to become the heart of the new Indian history. The god, counterpart henceforward of Jesus and Mohammed, is an incarnated personality who leads a very real life in historic countrysides. Leaving the mythological universe, timeless and without precisely defined localisation of the epic, as the narrative is first a semiological countryside, the terrestrial symbol henceforth concentrates around himself the whole of hinduness, including its proclaimed enemy: the historic Muslim whose contemptible metonymy is Babur, and no longer the demonic hyperbole, Rāvana. Today, Rām is the microcosm in which a new *Bhārat* is drawn together. And, never has Mother India appeared so virile! Rām’s throne at Ayodhya is the epicentre, the seat of the central power of a State which requisites devotion. The body of the god, which has grown muscular following the example of a film icon of the realistic type, is the symbol of a warlike hinduness: Rām(bo) beckons and militates for new geographic, territorial and religious boundaries (Kapur 1993). The territorialisation of Rām enables the reconstruction, which earlier was conceptual, but in later times has become a call to action, of a space for and an exclusive history of hinduness, a national history, the motive force of which is antagonism towards Muslims.

A recent innovation, the popular cultural integration of hinduness conforms to the teaching of V. D. Sarvakar, head of the Hindu Mahasabha, the Grand Association of Hindus, from 1937 to 1942. In his work, *Hindutva, who is a Hindu?*, published in 1924, he links identity to a territory conceived of as “land of the fathers” (*piirbhūmi*) — the meaning has lineage implications, if not racial —, but in so far as it is founded on a devotion to the “sacred land” (*punyahbhūmi*) of Hinduism through its geographic and historic character; it has almost the sense of *Geist* (as in Herder or Fichte). The message is still very much alive. H. V. Seshadri, a “preacher” (*pracāarak*) from Karnataka, describes the true Hindu motherland as a space sanctified by diligently attended domestic shrines and of piously venerated icons. One offers there daily worship (*pūja*) and receives the minimum

sacraments (*samskāra-s*) — conferring of names, marriages, funeral ceremonies —, briefly, the entire arsenal of the bigotry of a Hinduism which defines itself as orthodox.

M. S. Gowalkar added a zoological dimension to sacred geography by proscribing respect for cows as a basis of Indian national unity in his charter of the RSS movement entitled, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1949). The cow is the Indian symbol of social organicism, inspired by European fascists, of which M. S. Gowalkar saw himself as theoretician, as well as architect: he organised the “branches” (*śākhā-s*) of the RSS, paramilitary units in the service of a utopia responding to the nostalgia of a Hindu golden age which lasted “over eight or ten thousand years before the land was invaded by any foreign race”, as Gowalkar wrote (1949: 49). However, India is actually in an antithetical, calamitous state: the sacred territory of the ancestors was devastated first by Muslim, then by English invasions. It is thus only proper to restore by conquest this space of spurious rights. While for the Hindu Mahasabha, this would mean recovering the domain of ideal ancient kingship (*Hindu Rāj*), the RSS would have it preceded by the nation-state (*Hindu rāṣṭra*)¹². In either case, the sovereign model is Rām, both unifier of Hindus (*cakravartin*) and destroyer of foreigners (*vikramāditya*). His odyssey, in fact, is one and the same with an epic voyage across the subcontinent, hunting demons: the second Aryan raid, no less imaginary than the first (Thapar 1989).

Akhaṇḍ Bhārat, a utopian cartography

Since at least 1977, the Congress (I) Party has played the cartography of India against the balkanisation of the country. However, it was during the 1989 parliamentary elections that one witnessed a veritable card game played by political parties which made unprecedented use of the media to win popular support (Sarwate 1990). Congress, Janata Dal, and the BJP (as well as the DMK in the South) launched publicity campaigns centred around physical maps of India, published in newspapers and magazines. In the caption beneath one such map, the Congress Party asked: “Will this be the last time you see India in this shape?” By way of response, the BJP issued a map of territories “lost” by the Congress government. The argument refers to the Hindu fundamentalist geography of the *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat*, “undivided India”, the boundaries of which extend from Afghanistan in the west, to Burma in the east, inclusive of Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and other neighbouring regions. The *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat* serves as frontispiece of the RSS publication, *The Organiser*, and it is regularly used in pamphlets, posters and other propagandistic literature. According to that organisation, not only is India no longer India, because some of its parts have been amputated, but its body is already decayed by social maladies and impurity. The editors of the review, *The Organiser*, systematically employ the word “*Napakistan*” (“Land of the Impure”) to designate Pakistan.

One recognises in this India, the vital space of which is expanding, the cosmologic will of the *hindutva* movement. Thus, the first of the video cassettes produced by the

¹² Contrary to current nationalists, M. S. Gowalkar distinguished the nation (*rāṣṭra*) from the state, because he defined it in the first place as “cultural”, that is, embracing a living community on a territory to which it would have both organic and emotive relations.

VHP, entitled *Bhāyī prakat krpālu* ("The forgiving brothers are brought together again") presents precisely this sacred land whose capital is Ayodhya. *Bhārat*, an off-camera voice says, is a gift from the superior wisdom embodied in Rām. And, to assist in the big-bang transforming the cosmos into a saffron-coloured map, that of *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat*, a beam of light illuminates Ayodhya — the heart of the body of *hindouité*. India is, thus, less a geographic entity than a cosmological product, born at the same time as Rām. Once again entering history, which consists of a summary of the life of Rām, if one is to believe the commentator, brutal images suddenly appear on the screen: Babur invades Indian history. Battle upon battle, one sees the Hindu people valiantly resisting the Muslim invasion under the leadership of kings and *sādhu*-s. Sections of a miniature represent a Muslim killing a doe, shadows of daggers on the wall testify to the perversity of the barbaric violence. At this moment, Rām re-appears, finally reincarnated, directing an arrow from his bow and a seductive smile at the viewer.

A (re-)mapping of territory

In 1995, the combined BJP-VHP-RSS set the programme for a vast agitation campaign which was to continue until regional elections, foreseen for February 1996. Corresponding to a strategy of both local and global character, it was highlighted by two major moments: the re-conquest of temples in Kashi and Mathura, and the launching of processions throughout the width and breadth of Indian territory.

A local strategy: Kashi (Banaras)-Mathura

The first campaign began in the second week of July. It was in keeping with the orientation of the Ayodhya campaign (1992), as it was a question of "liberating" temples in the towns of Kashi and Mathura. More precisely, it concerned the performing of "adoration" (*pūjā*), called *jalābhīṣek*, to Lord Śṛṅgār Gaurī in Kashi, and of making a great sacrifice to Lord Viṣṇu (*Mahāvīṣṇu yajña*) in Mathura. In anticipation of national elections in 1996, the leaders wanted to prevent demonstrations from getting out of hand this time by instructing the devotees to fight within the law. Religious manifestation borders on the political: the caste of Lord Kṛṣṇa of Mathura is Yadava, the caste which is presently dominant in the state of Uttar Pradesh¹³. It is also a question of radical organisations galvanising the upper castes, which are disconcerted by the BJP support of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The latter is a defender of the Untouchables (Dalits) and favourable to Muslims, to whom quotas for job reservations were promised during the elections.

The results of this agitation bear witness to the tactical hazards of a strategy of conquest which aims at encompassing sacred places. In 1984, when the Ayodhya campaign was started, the *hindutva* movement had no headquarters in the town. But, within a few years, the institutions opposed to the hegemony of the saffron militants

¹³ For a description of the regional configurations of (dominant) castes, *vide* Assayag (1995).

(*parīvār-s*) were either destroyed or had been definitively secured by force in 1991. Beginning with these offensive positions, the final assault took place in 1992. Identical courses of action were drawn up in Kashi and Mathura. In the first town, the strategy was successful: the base of a cult has today been established, along the western wall of the mosque, near to the site where the effigy of Lord Śṛṅgār Gaurī is allegedly buried beneath débris. A new cultural tradition has been born: every Monday during the month of *ṣrāvāṇa* (July/August), devotees have gone there to perform “adorations” (*mahāpūjā-s*). In Mathura, a similar enterprise failed as a result of the firmness of the central government’s interventions and of the agreement made with the regional state authorities. The large sacrifice to Viṣṇu did indeed take place there, but at four kilometres distance from the temple and not near the prayer wall (*Īdgāh*) which adjoins it, as the militants had intended.

A global (re-)mapping

In the beginning of September 1995, the VHS started the “unity procession”, the *Ekatmātā yātrā*. Nine large processions and 2800 small pilgrimages traversed 50 000 villages covering more than two million kilometres to reach 150 000 000 people, according to Ashok Singhal, the international general secretary of the VHP. Thus, a net was cast over the entire territory of India, in north and south, east and west, during a period of twenty-five days. The processions converged, on 18 October, in Ramtek, forty-five kilometres from Nagpur, a town situated in the geographical centre of India and where the general headquarters of the RSS is located. According to legend, Ramtek, or Raktekdi, the “hill of Rama”, is the place where the god put to death the outcaste ascetic, Sambuka. Subsequent of this crime, a demon (*rākṣasa*) or a Brahmin constructed *five* temples on the hill: one is dedicated to Rāma — it shelters images of Rāma and Sitā —, a second is consecrated to Lakṣmaṇasvāmī, a third, to the goddess Ekadasi, one to Hanuman, the last to Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇa. The ruins of the cultural complex date from the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth, a period in which the cult of Rāma was created or revived (Pollock 1993: 266-267).

The purpose of this network of processions, conducted by Hindu religious leaders (*sādhu-s*), of which groups of renunciants march at the front to ensure protection, is officially non-political. It is a question of sounding an alarm respective of the “antinational activities such as cow-slaughter, proselytisation by Muslims and Christians, missionaries and infiltration of Bangladeshi nationals into India”. The other avowed aim is to “build up public awareness of the need to maintain the sanctity of the Ganga and against its pollution”¹⁴. Acharya Giriraj Kishore, joint general secretary of the VHP, said that the actual deities of the procession: Gangāmātā, Gomātā and Bhāratamātā — the latter is the central idol, flanked by portraits of legendary heroes of Hindu nationalism at the (Sarasvatī Śiśu) temple of the RSS in Delhi — well express these concerns. Sudhakar

¹⁴ This struggle, expanded to that for the protection of rivers and cows, is described as “ecological”. Such an “environmentalist” ideal is purported to be present in the most ancient religious texts of Brahminism (Basu *et al.* 1993: 32-33).

Kakade, convener of the processions, emphasises that no political leaders had been invited to share the dais during the celebrations.

At the end of the itinerary, the march came together at the *Dikṣā Bhūmi* ("land [or place] of initiation"), that is, at the *stūpa* of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar — the leader of the Untouchables who converted to Buddhism to escape the stigmatisation of Hinduism — in order to rally the Dalits and Adivasis who have hitherto remained aloof from the *hindutva* movement. The programme called *Rām kichdi* ("Rām mixture") has been implemented from the second week of the *yātrā*. It consists of bringing together Dalits, Adivasis and other low castes and having them share a meal with high castes. In the beginning, the *yātrā* had great success in Uttar Pradesh, because the BJP had, since June of 1995, given its support to the BSP, the Dalit party in power in the state. Its leader, Mayawati, was the only Untouchable Chief Minister in all of India: she remained in that position for 147 days. However, following the defection of the BJP, in September 1995, the enthusiasm of the lower castes began to wane. The reaction to the *yātrā* which set out from Hardwar, and was also to cross Uttar Pradesh, was identical. That which set out from Somnath, a town symbolising Hindu humiliation since the immense Siva temple was destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century, was disrupted by the near collapse of the BIP government in Gujarat. Heavy rains got the better of the *yātrā-s* in Arunchal Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. Only the procession in the South, which set out from Rameshwaram, received a favourable welcome, even though the supervision was much less structured than in the North; an evident sign of the *hindutva* movement's propagation in the cone of India.

It was again at Nagpur that *sant-s and mahant-s*, together with the Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Gopinath Munde, an Adivasi, paid homage to Dr. Ambedkar, the "awakener" of the Untouchables. In 1993, the VHP had decided to win over the Dalits to the Hindu current by raising Ambedkar to the status of "Manu", the lawmaker of Hinduism. At the first anniversary of the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya, his portrait, among those of Hindu deities, decorated the dais of the VHP meeting. While Swami Vishwesa Theerta, from the Pejawar monastery (*maṭh*) at Udipi, and Swami Paramanand Maharaj participated in the ceremony, other religious leaders such as Swami Vasudevananda Shankaracharya and Ramachandra Parambhans refrained from attending so as to participate in the *Dikṣā Bhūmi*, also held at Nagpur. Sadanand Fulzule, secretary of the Ambedkar *stūpa*, explained to the press that it was inconceivable to refuse such a homage: Ambedkar himself would have authorised it. Had he not fought for the right of the Untouchables to enter temples? But, when the VHP members chanted "Jai Śrīrām!" ("victory to Lord Rām"), the neo-Buddhists began to sing "*Buddham, Saranam, Gacchāmi*" ("I shall seek refuge in Buddha"), which they punctuated with "*Ambedkar Zindabad!*".

The aim of the reverence paid to Dr. Ambedkar by the *hindutva* movement was the restoration of harmony in India — which would have existed prior to the Muslim and British invasions — between Hinduism and the other forms of Hindu religious expression¹⁵: Buddhism and Jainism. On the short term, it is a question of constituting an international axis between Hindus and Buddhists. A conference is to be held in Bangkok

¹⁵ For a description of the relations between Islam, Christianity and Hinduism, cf. J. Assayag & G. Tarabout (1996).

in February 1996. Regarding the fate of non-Hindu religions, Hindu leaders had, during the previous days in Ranktek, politically called for the extermination of the demons, by which is to be understood the anti-*Bhārata*-s. The head of the Bajrang Dal, Jaibhan Singh Powayya, flanked by Sadhavi Rithambara and Ramchand Paramahans, had promised the application of the *lex talionis* to Christian and Muslim races in the case of discrimination against Hindus, wherever they live¹⁶!

In 1983, the VHP had undertaken the first large-scale processions in the “sacrifice for unity”, the *ekatmātāyajña*. The leaders of the *hindutva* movement wanted therewith to mobilise Hindus in view of the next elections. According to an official publication of the organisation, the three processions would have reached sixty million persons. The first left Hardwar, in the north, on 16 November, to reach Kanyakumari, in the extreme south, on 20 December. The second, inaugurated by the King of Nepal, started from Kathmandu on 26 October and arrived in Rameshwaram, in Tamil Nadu, on 16 December. The third procession started in Gangasagar, near Calcutta, and reached Somnath on 17 December. They crossed each other in the centre of the country, at Nagpur, following the paradigm of the confluence (triveṇī) of the three sacred rivers (*saṅgam*) at Prayag (Allahabad). The itinerary of the march thus followed the hydrography sacred to the Mother. And, comparable to so many afluent not less than forty-seven small processions (*upayātrā*-s), lasting five days, crossed other parts of the country, each of which joined one of the three larger processions at assembly places organised by the RSS. They followed the traditional pilgrimage routes which link the principal religious centres, thus suggesting the geographical unity of India (*Bhāratavarṣa*) in the sense of sacred land (*kṣetra*) which the modern Hindu crusaders tread. Each of the three large processions included a temple chariot (*ratha*), that is, a Honda or Toyota van fitted out and decorated in the manner of Arjuna’s chariot in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The three vehicles had been christened: Mahādevāratha, Paśupatiratha, Kapilaratha, from the names of the local deities at each of the places of departure. The “chariots” of the VHP, white and surmounted by a lotus, symbol of the BJP, also contained an image of *Bhārat Mātā*, Mother India, and an enormous receptacle (*kalaśa*) with water drawn from the Ganga. A lorry followed the “chariots”, transporting small bottles of the precious liquid which could be purchased. Whoever did not participate in the ritual of lustral distribution was considered as outside the fold of the Indian unity which was being circumscribed. The presence of a “chariot” sent by Nepal, of a delegation from Burma bringing water from the Irrawadi River, of a procession from Bhutan paying its tribute, of vessels of water brought from the religious sites of Ramsar, Mauritius, from Bangladesh and Pakistan, confirmed that *Akhand Bhārat*, integral India, was indeed alive.

¹⁶ One should remember the racial tendency of the *hindutva* movement, notably the opposition between Aryan and Semitic blood, that is to say, of Muslims and Christians who sully the body of *Bhārat*. Only true Indians (i.e. descendants of Aryans) have inherited the blood of Rām. Regarding the concept of “race” in Hinduist nationalist currents of the years 1920-1930, one may refer to C. Jaffrelot (1995), although he clears them of all (biological) racism by maintaining a “holistic hierarchic” model based on Dumont (1995: 349). That is to show little regard for their obsessional and inflationist utilisation of terms associated with “blood” and “purity”. A quote from M. S. Gowalkar is, in this respect, illuminating: “German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic races — the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and to profit by” (1949: 27). Cf. P. Robb concerning the concept of race in South Asia (1995).

Ashok Singhal, general secretary of the VHP, started a *yātrā* from Janakpuri to Ayodhya, in November 1984, just prior to the general elections. Janak whose name was given to this small town, was the king who broke with his ploughshare the earthen pot from which his daughter, Sītā, was born. It was the year in which the agitation campaign for Ayodhya was begun. But, the idea of “liberating the temples” of Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura, had been called off at a meeting held clandestinely in the course of 1980. One wished to enlarge and strengthen the militant, social and political base of *hindutva*.

In 1985, a symbol was conceived which had the strongest emotional impact in India. The VHP conspicuously carried throughout the country an image of Lord Rām, held in a locked cage, an allusion to the impossibility of gaining access to his place of birth, *janmabhūmi*. Five years later, just before new elections, a *yātrā* was organised to take to Ayodhya bricks consecrated to Rām (*rāmsilā*) from all Indian villages, as well as from communities of the Hindu diaspora throughout the world, who are essential for the financing of the *hindutva* movement and the eventual edification of the temple (*mandir*) of Rām on the site of the Babur mosque. Excesses during the procession resulted in three hundred deaths, primarily of Hindus.

In 1990, the BJP launched the “mother” of all *yātrā*-s, which the press characterised as the “*hindutva* juggernaut”, to protest against the decision of V. P. Singh, leader of the National Front government, to implement the policy of job reservations as recommended by the Mandal Commission. Nationalists proclaimed that this policy had only in view the division of Hindus. In August, L. K. Advani conducted the *Rath yātrā* (the drivers of which were Muslim!) from Somnath to Ayodhya. Young members of a new section of the Bajrang Dal offered him a goblet filled with their blood as an expression of their determination¹⁷. L. K. Advani was jailed for a time in Bihar; nevertheless, his supporters continued but were stopped by police firing. The campaign was promulgated by a massive circulation of a video cassette bearing witness to the fact that thousands of militants (*kar-sevak*-s) had been killed by the forces of law and order, that those “martyrs” had been cremated and that the bones and ashes were to be put in ritual urns (*asthi-kalāṣa*-s). These were to be carried in procession throughout India before being immersed in the holy rivers. The emotion aroused by the “martyrdom of saffron brothers” worked towards the success of the movement. It provoked the fall of the V. P. Singh government by strengthening the electoral power of the BJP to an unprecedented extent.

In November 1992, the leaders of the BJP, L. K. Advani, and of the Shiv Sena, “the army of Siva”, Murli Manohar Joshi, led two *yātrā*-s which set out from Ayodhya in the direction of Kashmir. It was a matter of attracting attention to the situation of the Hindus martyred in that state. These marches prepared the atmosphere which was to lead to the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya in the same year. During the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, in 1993, a *yātrā* was organised from Mysore to Bhopal, this time to protest against the “pseudo-secularism” of the government — an expression which designates members of the Congress Party and politicians allegedly favourable to Muslims.

¹⁷ This symbolic violence — in which one recognises the identification of the sacrificer with the sacrificed victim, according to the mechanism discerned and very well elucidated by M. Mauss —, serves to show the participation of the militants in the fabrication of the transcendent and imperishable entity which is the Hindu nation. This interpretation is drawn from the theory of Bloch (1992).

Body celebrated, body wounded

The Hindu body

The capillary network drawn by the militant cartography of the *hindutva* processions periodically revitalises the body of India. This “high-tech” ritual activity¹⁸ is original and combines a few structural elements of Hindu tradition: “adoration” (*pūjā*), sacrifice (*yajña*), procession (*yātrā*), and the following of the principal ancient pilgrimage routes, halting at a few sacred sites which the selective memory of the community has transformed into so many “traumatic places” of humiliation inflicted by the (Muslim) “foreigner”. It is thus less a question of traversing the “ford” (*tīrtha*), with the objective of seeing the abolishment of evil, than of activating the familiar battery of a few emotional stereotypes: Bhārat, the cow, Rāma, Babur, Gaṅgāmātā, etc., achieving the greatest possible public resonance by means of an intense use of the media. Through this mobilisation rising in a crescendo, a unity of the saffron cult, enlarged to the magnitude of the continent, crystallises. The ritual activity can extend over months, corresponding to a calendar of reorganised festivals and in which elections are integrated — and the exclusive society of Hindus celebrates itself in the apotheosis of the nation. The covering of the peninsula is nothing other than a social and political production of Hinduised nationalism, or of the Hinduisation of nationalism, as defined by M. S. Gowalkar in 1938:

... this great country of ours, extending in the North from the Himalayas — with all its branches spreading North, South, East and West, and with the territories included in those great branches right up the southern ocean, inclusive of all the islands, is one great natural unit. As the child of this soil, our well-evolved society has been living here for thousands of years. The society has been known, especially in modern times, as the Hindu society. This is also historical fact. For it is the forefathers of the Hindu People who have set up standards and traditions (...), prescribed duties and rights (...), shed their blood in defense of the sanctity and integrity of the Motherland. That all this has been done only by the Hindu People is a fact to which our history of thousands of years bears eloquent testimony. It means that only the Hindu has been living here as a child of this soil (1949: 333-334).

This description may serve to explain the function allotted to the numerous processions set in motion by the electoral-theological machinery devised by the BJP and its accomplices since the 1980s. The discourse on *hindutva* is an essential part, as the anti-Semitic ideology was for National Socialism — the “intentionalist” approach in history is also applicable in contemporary India¹⁹. Its objective is to (re)produce the boundaries

¹⁸ Any action can probably become ritual to the extent that it is endowed with intentionality (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1993: 3). Hence, the employment of the notion of ritual action, namely the idea that an action is transformed through ritualisation (Assayag, 1996). This shows to which extent the argument of the “manipulation” of credulous people by a political elite, by means of the “instrumentalisation” of religious figures, disregards adherence of the masses to politicians, who, moreover, are pragmatic or cynical. The diabolical malignity of A. Hitler no more explains Nazi National Socialism, than the idiosyncrasies of L. K. Advani or B. Thackeray explain the fact that more than one hundred million Indians vote saffron. Cf. note 20.

¹⁹ This is an allusion to the German controversy between “intentionalist” historians, who attempt to explain the exceptionality of the Nazi regime by that of its leader, of his ideology and, notably, of his visceral anti-Semitism which led to genocide, and the “functionalists”, who characterise the régime as polyarchic, that is, a (dis)organisation constituted of numerous centres of power and more or less autonomous bureaucratic institutions, federated through the person of Hitler alone.

at each procession. An external boundary of the country which incorporates expatriates haunted by nostalgia and wanting to still be there — the Hindus of the diaspora. Thus, the diastole of the “saffron” movement marks its area of expansion, by exclusion and inclusion, by and beyond territorial lines. Paying little heed to presently existing borders, it constructs the nation as a sovereign entity designated as the body of *hindutva*. Not all those living within the geographical frontiers constitute the nation, contrary to the ideal of composite nationalism defined by the secularist constitution of India. The only valid test of patriotism is allegiance to a religion of the land India, whatever name it should bear — *Bhārat*, *pitṛbhūmi*, *māṭṛbhūmi*, *puṇyabhūmi* or *karmabhūmi* — as the body of *dharma* has always summed up the laws of Hindus (Basu *et al.* 1993: 77). The purpose of the type of ritual activity represented by mass processions is to demarcate the spatial extension of hinduness, to show the extent of its authority, and to distinguish its members in a manner both concrete and symbolic. Deployed over the public space which they at the same time “saffronise”, these solemn rituals attest to the sharing of an immemorial identity, determined at the outermost bounds of a culture and the race²⁰; space rather than territory, rite rather than contract, hinduness rather than indianess, authoritarian monarchy rather than democracy. The nation of Rām is a ritual activity which Hindus alone periodically renew²¹.

The Muslim body

However, this ostentation of the glorious body of hinduness has its reverse side. The ritual action, in effect, conceals another social manifestation which extends and completes it in violence. For the wounded body of India is that of the Muslims. What is called communalism is, in fact, a euphemism which designates the often planned massacre of Muslims. One means of mobilising the Hindu community against them is to circulate inflammatory pamphlets, in the style of that by Ahmednagar in 1969: “Wipe out those who have dishonoured your mothers and sisters; show them that the Muslims who have insulted Hindu religion and molested our mothers and sisters will not be able to stay in India (quoted by Mukhia 1995: 1365). In this short sentence are superimposed the body of women, honour, religion and history. Not only is the Indian nation identified with the vulnerability of women, but the entire Muslim community is perceived as an Other, phallic and aggressive. Woman’s body is the mediation through which territory, religion, honour and nation are violated or defended by men (Butalia 1995). Mob rape, such as committed during partition in 1947, belongs not only to the archaeology of horror. Communalist riots allude to this memory by repeating it on a reduced, but not negligible, scale. Attested or produced by rumour, rapes are added to murders to engender

²⁰ This conforms to the idea of V. D. Savarkar, according to which there exists a substratum common to all Hindus, irrespective of ethnic group, status, caste or practices: “We are all Hindus and own a common blood” (1969: 89). A statement which today authorises the *hindutva* movement to induce Untouchables to enter into the fold of a unified “saffron” Hinduism.

²¹ Thus, as P. Lutgendorf has noted, the essential element in the interpretation of the *Rām rāj* is present in the rhetoric of the nationalist parties, notwithstanding the slogan used: *Rām rājya* for the Rama Rajya Parishad (RRP), *dharma rāj* for the Jan Sangh (JS), *Hindu rāṣṭra* for the Hindu Mahasabha (MH), *Bhāratīya Maryādā* for the Swatantra Party (SP) (1995: 276).

the sentiment of fear in the respective communities: henceforth, both consider themselves to be persecuted minorities (Agarwal 1995: 35). Conversely, the image of a motherland in which pure Hindus are conquered, raped, defiled and enslaved like women — first by the Muslims, then by the British — has added substantially to the nationalist historiography of the subcontinent.

In his inquiry into the communal carnage in Surat, in December 1992, Jan Breman confirms that one of the most frequent scenarios was the organised murder of the enemy in front of a group of women, including their children, followed by their rape, or inversely (1993: 734-741). Because of the extreme violence of the situation, rape is viewed both as an individual and private shame for the victim and its family, if members survive, but also as a collective and public celebration: the rapist is a hero. Video-*rath*-s and cassettes echo on a large scale testimonies given by violated women of the community; in addition, infamous filmed simulations are widely circulated. The real becomes “cinema truth” by the transfer of violence without restraint, with which is mixed the most vulgar sexual symbolism of mediatised popular culture (Dickey 1993: 124-128). The mystification is all the more manifest as these films depict Hindu men, women and children being brutalised by a gang of Muslims!

The inversion of the aggressor to the aggressed goes back at least to the propaganda of Dr. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS (in 1925). In the 1930s, he railed against the Hindu Congress members, applying to them the insult “snake-foreigners” usually reserved for Muslims: “The *yavan*-snakes reared on the milk of Non-Cooperation were provoking riots in the nation with their poisonous hissing” (quoted by Basu *et al.* 1993: 14). This is, moreover, the manner in which the officially recognised historians of the *hindutva* movement re-write history, spreading notably the idea that the Islamisation of the subcontinent is related to an advancing tide of barbarians thirsting after sex and blood. Or, they are occupied with the maligning of their co-religionists: the first page of the issue of 14 August 1947 of the RSS paper, *The Organiser*, presents a map of India covered by the body of a woman whose arm (= Pakistan) has been cut off; Nehru holds the severed arm by the hand!

The use of the distorted mechanism of reversing the situation from persecutor to persecuted, and the simultaneous designation of the scapegoat, marginalises all those who do not profess collective vengeance. The imagery of the severed, amputated, violated bodies of women, of Hindus, of Hindustan, and the trope of the impotence of those who neither aggress nor kill Muslims, dominate the discourse of the virulent oracle of the BJP, Sadhavi Rithambara²². Her name has a high mythological charge: “Sadhavi” is an epithet describing a female hermit, and “Rithambara” that of a celestial nymph using its physical beauty and its charm to seduce the *saṁnyāsīn* whose penitence is perceived as menacing the order established by the benevolent gods; having been ravished, the *saṁnyāsīn* loses the sacred effects of his penitence and becomes powerless. A tragic reversal of the

²² An article by A. Basu presents the three renunciant viragoes, furious prophetesses of *hindutva*. Vijayraje Scindia, who was at the avant-garde in defence of the custom of *satī*, Uma Bharati, known as the “sexy *saṁnyāsīn*”, and Sadhavi Rithambara. A transcription of a discourse by the latter can be read in the magazine *Manushi* (Kishwar 1990). S. Kakar has given psychoanalytic commentaries on longer passages from a speech given by Sadhavi Rithambara (1995: 197-214) which he has translated.

mythology, as well as of the history, of nationalism. Whereas Mahatma Gandhi had adopted the model of the renunciant, mortifying his body to the extreme limit of his life, with the objective of bringing inter-communitarian violence to an end — he had said: “If the Congress wishes to accept partition, it will be over my dead body” (quoted by Nandy 1990: 88) —, the young passionaria of the BJP, bearing a name exemplifying the seduction of renunciation, rather than the renunciation of seduction, publically provokes the militants, calling them impotent if they do not massacre Muslims. An example of this fabrication of hate:

We Hindus face this way, the Muslim the other. We Hindus write from left to right, the Muslims from right to left. We Hindus pray to the rising sun, the Muslim faces the setting sun when praying. If the Hindu eats with the right hand, the Muslim with the left. If the Hindu calls India “Mother”, she becomes a witch for the Muslim. The Hindu worships the cow, the Muslim attains paradise by eating beef. The Hindu keeps a moustache, the Muslim always shaves the upper lip. Whatever the Hindu does, it is the Muslim’s religion to do its opposite. I say, If you want to do everything contrary to the Hindu, then the Hindu eats with his mouth; you should do the opposite in this matter too! ²³.

To the violence perpetrated on the body of the Muslim is added the idea that its men marry several wives, and that the latter are excessively fertile. At the time of the clashes in Bombay, in 1982, a pamphlet stated:

There is a well-planned conspiracy behind the riots continuously occurring in the country. From Morocco to Malaysia, India is the only country where Muslims are still a minority. Therefore, constant efforts are being made to increase the Muslim population by not accepting the family planning programmes of the government, by producing more children, by keeping more than one wife and converting Hindus to Islam. They are dreaming of installing a Muslim government in this country by taking advantage of the democratic system of India (Mukhia: 1995).

Sexual phantasy, demographic fear and foreboding of a political plot foster the idea that India has too many Muslims. This is a call to implement any measure, including the most anti-democratic, to render non-Hindus sterile. Measures which “pseudo-secularists” are reluctant to take, according to Sadhavi Rithambara, who enthusiastically repeats the following apologue:

When Rāma was banished from Ayodhya many citizens accompanied him to the forest and stayed there overnight. In the morning, Rāma said: “Men and women of Ayodhya, go back to your homes”. The men and women went back but a group of hermaphrodites, who are neither men nor women, stayed back and asked: “Lord, you have not given us any instructions”. Rama is kind. He said: “In the future *Kaliyuga* you will rule for a little while”. These, neither-men-nor-women, are your rulers today. They will not be able to protect India’s unity and integrity (translated and quoted by Kakar 1995: 213).

²³ This passage is cited by A. Basu (1995: 164) and Kakar (1995: 213) in two slightly different forms. This invective clearly brings out the fact that the theory of the political instrumentalisation of religious figures explains nothing, or very little, as far as it is here a question of conviction, and not only of Sadhavi Rithambara, but of more than one hundred million voters; cf. note 15.

The West was for a long time inclined to retain from India only the stereotype of a body meditating. Some from the generations of the sixties sacrificed to this delight, adding that of the liberation of morals through “flower power”. Today, owing to “globalisation” and “information highways”, to use recent jargon, the West discovers the image of bodies ravaged by inter-communitarian hand-to-hand fighting, product of the ritual activities conceived by *hindutva*. The fascistic movement is spreading in modernity: it adopts the instruments, but reformulates the norms and values which must accompany it on an ethnico-racial basis. Reinforced by structural adjustment, the crisis of state legitimacy and the development of forms of radicalism, it is to be feared that a growing proportion of new generations will give way to this hate. Considering the vastness and diversity of India, let us hope that such a prognosis will only mean replacing one stereotype with another.

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Jackie Assayag

CNRS
École Française d'Extrême Orient
22, Av du Président Wilson, Paris

This essay is focused on the construction of the geopolitical and symbolic "body" of the Indian nation in three distinct periods: the British raj; the movement that precedes and follows independence in 1947; and the controversial and troublesome times which began in the 1980s.

In each of these moments, several resources allowed for the conceptualization and imagination of the body of India — British imperial cartography, the centrality of the cow, and ramraj (the realm of the Hindu god Rāma, an avatar of Viṣṇu). Asserting the integrity of the symbolic body of India, these resources have also been used as tools for a disquieting Hindu integralism, in the conditions of religious and ethnic strife of contemporary India.