The Hindu nationalist reinterpretation of pilgrimage in India: the limits of Yatra politics

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ABSTRACT. Victor Turner’s anthropological reading of pilgrimages in terms of communitas is of utmost relevance in the case of Hinduism: indeed, Hindu pilgrimages produce a relative and temporal obliteration of social cleavages – particularly caste divisions – allowing the emergence of a sense of group belonging. Moreover, the geography of pilgrimage sites maps out the sacred land, marking the area of extension of Hindu civilisation in space. Hindu nationalists have tried to exploit this particular alchemy to offer an ethnic definition of the nation (and its territory) and thereby gather a following by lending some of their demonstrations the appearance of a pilgrimage. This approach asserted itself in the early 1980s thanks to the Ekatmata Yatra (Unity March) in 1983, and was confirmed in 1990 during the Rath Yatra (Chariot festival). Nevertheless, the instrumentalist interpretation of such movements comes up against an issue that is already at the core of subaltern studies’ historiography, i.e. that masses do not always mobilise for the reasons put forth by political leaders. More specifically, if women march massively in the streets during these Yatra pilgrimages, it is both because they feel concerned by the reason for demonstrations and because these demonstrations have legitimised their entry into the public space, which still remains relatively closed to them.

KEYWORDS: Hindu nationalism; pilgrimage; sacred geography

Yatra: A Journey, a procession, a pilgrimage, an expression which reflects an ancient Indian tradition that has emerged over millennia. Yatra: an organised and often angry politico-religious march which has an enormous potential for turning incendiary, which risks further widening the communal divide and which is invariably conducted with a cynical eye on vote-gathering and elections. No prizes for guessing which definition finds favour with the BJP and the Sangh Parivar.1

The notion of pilgrimage – ‘yatra’ in Sanskrit and in many Indian vernacular languages – is one of the mainstays of Hinduism which has undergone substantial nationalist reinterpretations in the course of time. The newspaper editorial from which the text above is excerpted juxtaposes two versions of it which seem to be poles apart. In India today, when someone uses the word
yatra, he may indeed refer to a religious institution, namely a pilgrimage or a procession, or to an ethno-religious demonstration of strength by some Hindu militant organisations. But these two meanings are like the two faces of the same coin, and sometimes it is not so easy to distinguish one version from the other.

The traditional Hindu pilgrimage lent itself to political uses for two reasons: because of its territorial dimension which could be reinterpreted in ethno-nationalist terms in the case of pan-Indian yatras and because of its egalitarian quality which has affinities with the sociology of nations - even when they are based on ethno-religious criteria, nations do not admit intermediate bodies such as castes and tribes. The reinterpretation of the yatra by Hindu nationalists is, therefore, a good example of the reshaping of traditions by political entrepreneurs. But this instrumentalisation is limited in one respect. While the Hindutva leaders have tried to exploit yatras for mobilising popular support, the masses have not always taken part in yatra politics for the reasons they were supposed to.

Pilgrimage as the crucible of communitas and national space

The anthropology of pilgrimage outlined in Victor Turner’s work likened such ritual to a communitas. In contrast to social structures organised according to categories of class, caste, tribe or any other status group, the communitas forms a liminal entity based on ‘a directly personal egalitarian relationship.’ (Turner 1975: 201) Pilgrimages constitute communitas because they are undertaken by individuals acting of their own free will and also because they are nevertheless highly codified rituals that abide by an orthodoxy (ibid.: 177).

Pilgrimage thus defined is the archetypal communitas: both a collection of individuals transcending internal group status divisions and, at the same time, a binding category adhering to a particular identity. On one hand, pilgrimage ‘liberates the individual from the obligatory everyday constraints of status and role, defines him as an integral human being with a capacity for free choice, and within the limits of his religious orthodoxy presents for him a living model of human brotherhood and sisterhood’ (ibid.: 207); and on the other hand pilgrimage can generate,

... the kind of fanaticism which, in the Middle Ages, led to their Christian reformulation as Crusades and confirmed the Muslim belief in the spiritual necessity of a jihad or holy war, fought for custody of the pilgrimage shrines of the Holy Land. When communitas becomes force rather than ‘grace’, it becomes totalism, the subordination of the part to the whole instead of the free creation of the whole by the mutual recognition of its part (ibid.: 206).

Beyond that, Turner gives an ideological content to the pilgrimages he has studied throughout the world. To him they are ‘both instruments and indicators of a sort of mystical regionalism as well as of a mystical nationalism’ (ibid.: 212).
The other reason for which pilgrimage can be a vehicle for nationalism has to do with the geographic localisation usually occupied by the places visited by the faithful: they are usually in liminal areas, on the periphery of civilisational areas and they thus often delimit the territory of the ethnic nation as its ideologues define it.

**Hindu tirthas and the demarcation of a sacred space**

In India, the calendar of pilgrimages punctuates the life of the faithful, whether he is Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Jain. Some of these rituals are shared by the faithful of several confessions (Assayag 2004), but most of them have become community-specific (Morinis 1984) in the course of time because of the essentialising effect of British colonialism and the growing communal divide.

Hindus, who represent eighty per cent of the Indian population, naturally supply the largest hordes of pilgrims. In their case, places of pilgrimage are not only related to holy figures – as is the case for Muslims or Buddhists who pay visits to the tombs of Pirs or bhoddisatvas – but also and above all holy sites called *tirthas*. *Tirtha*, derived from the Sanskrit verb *tr/tarati*, ‘to cross’, refers to a ford: a *tirtha* is a holy place that provides special access to a god. Water being the prime vehicle of the sacred, the word *tirtha* also refers to a pool or bathing place (Eck 1981: 325). The typology of Hindu *tirthas* suggested by Diana Eck moreover begins with rivers such as the Ganges, Yamuna or Godavari, and places through which these waters flow, that figure among ‘the greatest of India’s sacred crossing’ (*ibid.*: 334): Benares, Haridwar, Gaya, Prayag (Allahabad). Then come the mountain *tirthas*, those of the Himalayas being the most famous - Badrinath, Kedarnath, Amarnath, and so on. In the third-place are the coastal *tirthas*, the foremost among which are Puri in the east, Chidambaram and Rameshvaram in the south and Dwarka and Somnath in the west. The forest *tirthas* may constitute a more heterogeneous ensemble, but the city *tirthas* are easily identifiable, because they are the seven holy cities of Hinduism where access to moksha (spiritual liberation) is reputedly easier: Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Benares, Kanchipuram, Ujjain and Dwarka. Lastly, the *jyotirlingam* are *tirthas* found both in the mountains and on the plains because they are stalagmites worshipped as *lingam* (phallic symbol representing Shiva). The most famous of them is in the Amarnath Cave in Kashmir to which there is an annual pilgrimage.

In addition to these *tirthas*, known throughout India, are naturally those whose influence is limited to a single province; but in that event, it is often the case that a legend or the high deeds of a mythical hero links them to ‘national’ – or ‘civilisational’ – places of pilgrimage. The network of *tirthas* thus sketches out a holy geography covering the entire space of Hindu civilisation. It should be pointed out in this regard that many anthropologists see these pilgrimages as vectors integrating ‘little traditions’ into some ‘great tradition’ – to use Redfield’s categories – starting with M.N. Srinivas, the father of Indian
ethnology for whom ‘Every great temple and pilgrim centre was a source of Sanskritisation [in other words, of emulating the great Brahmanic tradition], and the periodic festivals or other occasions when pilgrims gathered together at the centre provided opportunities for the spread of Sanskritic ideas and beliefs’ (Srinivas 1967: 74).

The notion of tirthas, indeed, reflects a conception of space codified by the Brahmanic tradition. In the Puranas, it is written that the earth forms a disk centred on Mount Meru in the Himalayas and surrounded by a belt of mountains (the Lokaloka). Seven continents lie between the two. The southern part of the one that is closest to the centre is called Bharatvarsha, after the name of the first king, Bharat, to have ruled on this earth. This kingdom stretched from the Gulf of Bengal to the Indian Ocean, to the Arabian Sea and the Tibetan plateau. The divinities watching over this land and its four cardinal points were said to have been ‘imported’ from the Lokaloka to settle in Puri to the east, Rameshwaram to the south, Dwarka to the west and Badrinath to the north. Undoubtedly, the four cardinal points are all equally represented on purpose. In the Dharmashastra, Bharat is described as a karmabhoomi, in other words the ideal ground on which to exercise rituals that enable men to affect their karma with the gods. As Halbfass emphasised, ‘According to the sacred cosmography of Hinduism, only Bharat is fit for ritual performances and soteriological activities’ (Halbfass 1990 [1981]: 177).

Logically then, the ultimate pilgrimage consists in ‘encircling the universe’ by touring India through Puri, Rameshwaram, Dwarka and Badrinath. Ascetics are the first to volunteer for this feat. Richard Burghart, who studied the renouncers of the Ramanandi order, notes that ‘Renouncers frequently state to one another that it is their solemn vow to visit all four quarters (dham) at least once in their lifetime’ (Burghart 1983: 371). In practice, in the course of the eight months of the year that their journey lasts (the monsoon months being very inauspicious for travel), most of them settle for going to Benares, Hariharkshetra (at the confluence of the Ganges and the Gandaki), Janakpur (where Ram and Sita married) in Nepal, and the Ganges Delta and Bengal before staying in Ayodhya for the rainy season. But Diana Eck points out that (i) beyond this already very long journey, ‘The circumambulation of the land of Bharat includes the […] seacoast tirthas’ (Eck 1981: 335) and that (ii) before taking rest in Benares ‘Pilgrims have circumambulated the whole of India, visiting hundreds of tirthas along the way, bringing water from the Ganga [Ganges] in the north to sprinkle the lingam of Rameshvaram in the far south and returning north with sands from Rameshvaram to deposit in the riverbed of the Ganga’ (ibid.: 334).

Hindu pilgrimages thus meet an important criterion of Victor Turner’s model which holds that, since holy places are on the periphery of the sacred domain, the routes followed by the faithful enable them to embrace the entire sacred space. It also corroborates Turner’s theory likening these rituals to communitas.

The pilgrimage of Pandharpur (Maharashtra) where, twice a year, thousands of Hindus come to worship the god Vithoba (a form of Vishnu) is a case...
in point. The bank of the river where the pilgrims establish their camp at the end of their journey is known as ‘walwanti ekata’, the ‘sand of unity’ because people mix freely, irrespective of caste. Professor Karve, who gave a very comprehensive account of this pilgrimage in the 1960s, suggests that, on the road, women tend to forget about their status to the point of having lunch together, be they Brahmin – like her – or of the Maratha caste (a dominant peasant caste considered less pure than the upper castes) (Karve 1962: 19). Karve emphasises the happiness that radiates from the pilgrims despite the fatigue and suffering endured during the journey – particularly due to fasting – to such an extent that she describes them as being ‘intoxicated with happiness’ (Karve 1988: 159), a feeling conducive to the formation of communitas, a group in the process of bonding.

Pandharpur also corroborates Turner’s interpretation with regard to the sacred geography of pilgrimage. The town is located at the southern limit of Marathi-speaking territory. It is thus on the periphery of the territorial and cultural unit that it defines, as are most places of pilgrimage. And twenty different pilgrimage routes converge towards Pandharpur, each leaving from a holy place associated with a poet of Maharashtra reputed for his high spiritual deeds. As Courtright points out, these ‘religious traditions have contributed immeasurably to the Maharashtrian sense of cultural unity’ (Courtright 1985: 204).

Other studies instruct us about how communitas are formed in the course of pilgrimage, and particularly the conditions in which individuals emerge in their own right and aggregate within a new moral community. Louis Dumont’s analysis according to which, in Hinduism, individuals could only be ‘outside of the world’ (Dumont 1966: 324–50), applies here because of the asceticism to which the faithful are bound. The Aiyappan pilgrimage in Kerala, for instance, requires that forty-one days before departure the faithful refrain from sexual intercourse, observe a vegetarian diet and sleep on the ground. Through this asceticism, ‘the pilgrim begins to be weaned away from society’ (Daniel 1984: 247), explains Valentine Daniel who participated in the pilgrimage. The trek itself is one of the most difficult because the pilgrims go barefoot on a forced march to optimise their merits – but they hum religious chants that add to their fervour. Although this display of asceticism is not to the taste of Brahmins who generally remain on the sidelines of pilgrimage, it is conducive to the development of a genuine sense of fraternity among men from different castes, upper and lower.

The preparation phase for the Aiyappan pilgrimage, in particular, involves practising brotherhood, as Lars Kjaerholm, who followed this phase in a Tamil Nadu village, points out: pilgrims ‘must treat each other as social equals . . . Psychologically what happens is an effort to efface the usual social identities, and an attempt to merge them with the divine identity’ (Kjaerholm 1986: 132). On their return, pilgrims seem to be transformed by the experience of collective fervor: ‘They all appeared to be immensely happy with the trip.
they had made. The joy of expectation had now become transformed into uninhibited joy . . .’ (ibid.: 136).

Maharashtrian pilgrimages to worship Vithoba and Kerales pilgrimage to worship Aiyappa still remain regional rituals. But in Hinduism there are of course many ‘national’ pilgrimages that crisscross all of India. The best known are naturally those that lead to the holy places located on the edges of the subcontinent. Ann Gold studied from within a group of Rajasthani pilgrims who decided to go to Puri on the Orissa coast. This pilgrimage also displays features of a communitas. Among the sixty-three participants, about a dozen were from the Brahmin caste, the rest of the troop being peasants from various castes. The journey to Puri – which lasts about ten days – was marked by intense group fervour and once they arrived at the Indian Ocean, in Puri, the faithful bathed ‘with remarkable abandon and togetherness’ (Gold 1988). On the way, the pilgrims stopped at Gaya to scatter into a tributary of the Ganges the ashes of relatives for whom they hoped thus to improve the chances of salvation. On the way back, they stopped at Haridwar, the place where the Ganges leaves the mountains and enters the plains, where they bought bottles of river water. Once back home, they drank this water during a final ritual, the Celebration of the Ganges, an indication that the essential aim of the pilgrimage that they had just accomplished was to make a tour of this most sacred river. But instead of doing such a tour on foot like their ancestors, they did it by bus, in thirty days, stopping at high tourist spots such as Agra.

From the monographs discussed above, it emerges that not only do Hindu tirthas mark out a sacred geography delimiting a civilisation, but also that the groups of pilgrims taking part in them form communitas in Turner’s sense. This second feature is explained by the very nature of tirthas which, as Eck points out, are places open to all, including ‘to Shudras, outcastes and women, who are excluded from brahminical rites’ (Eck 1981: 338); but more importantly, it has to do with the sociological alchemy of pilgrimage that manages to emancipate the individual from the status that the social structure assigns him, elevating him to the position of a person after a detour via ascetic values: the rules of pilgrimage require of the pilgrim the discipline of an ascetic, so much so that ‘The lay pilgrim becomes a sannyasin [an ascetic] of sorts, leaving the household behind and taking up the privations and hardships of the road’ (Eck 1981: 340). This is because the pilgrim, like the ascetic, is moved by one single aim: the quest for salvation. On the way, ‘each person, whatever his language, his country, his caste, is there for himself, in a private, individual capacity, not as a rightful member of any group. The individual is in the universal and asserts himself there, quite simply, as a Hindu, over and above the particularity of sociological determinations’ (Herrenschmidt 1989: 145). Having become an ascetic for the time this ritual lasts, the pilgrim achieves the status of an individual whose behaviour no longer depends on the orthopraxy of caste but on his relationship either to a guru and/or the group of which he is a part. For by taking a detour via the condition of an ascetic, the pilgrim is able to join a new community, Turner’s communitas. But this
socio-psychological construct is fleeting: it does not last longer than the ritual itself.

An increasing number of Hindus partake of this social and religious phenomenon that is pilgrimage. As Chris Fuller observes, ‘Pilgrimage has always been a vital part of Hinduism, but never more so than in the modern era, as ever-increasing numbers of pilgrims set out on longer and longer journeys’ (Fuller 1992: 204). This evolution of course has to do with the modernisation of means of communication that, in less than half a century, have made pilgrimages easier. In the early 20th century, as M.N. Srinivas noted in his study of the village of Rampur in Karnataka, making a pilgrimage to Benares was a privilege reserved for handful of inhabitants. Fifty years later, the same thing has become extremely common, and long sightseeing stops are scheduled along the way for all pilgrimages to the holy places of the North. This popular dimension of pan-Indian pilgrimages made this ritual institution even more attractive to the Hindu nationalists who had already tried to use religious processions. In fact they have attempted to utilise both dimensions of pilgrimage, its communitas features and its territorial symbolism.

Hindu nationalism and the politics of Yatra

The codification of Hindu nationalism goes back to the 1920s, and more precisely to the publication of an ideological charter entitled Hindutva – Who is a Hindu? by Veer Savarkar in 1923.9 In it, the author presents Hindus as forming a nation in and of themselves by the fact of their ethnic heritage (they descend from the first Aryans), their religious culture, their language – Sanskrit – and also the sacred land (punyabhoomi) they inhabit. For Savarkar, a Hindu is first of all someone who is born in the area lying between the Indus River, the Indian Ocean and the Himalayas, an area ‘so strongly entrenched that no other country in the world is so perfectly designed by the fingers of nature as a geographical unit’ (Savarkar 1969: 82). Paradoxically, the ethnic nationalism that the Hindutva embodies thus places considerable emphasis on territory. But there is no real contradiction therein because this regard for space does not refer to any sort of jus soli, but rather reflects the importance of the land in what remains a closed conception of political identity.10

The extremely strong emphasis on Hindu territory is again found in the chief Hindu nationalist movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS–National Volunteer Corps). Founded in 1925 by an admirer of Savarkar, K. Hedgewar, this movement immediately set itself the aim of reforming (and strengthening) the Hindu community – 70 per cent of Indian society at the time – to enable it to resist the Muslims – 24 per cent – by developing a network of local cells (shakhas–lit. ‘branches’) the members of which have met, over the past eighty years, every evening or every morning, theoretically irrespective of caste, for ideological and physical training sessions. The prayer
recited by the swayamsevaks (volunteers) to open and close each session, standing at attention before the saffron-coloured flag that they identify as their guru, confirms the extreme importance that the Indian land has in their imaginary construct:

I bow before you forever O beloved Mother Earth [Matribhoomi]! O our Hindu Mother Earth who has raised me in happiness. May my life be devoted to your cause, O great sacred land [Punyabhoomi] I worship. I bow before you again and again.

The mystique of the land echoes the notion of karmabhoomi mentioned earlier, because Hindu nationalists define the national territory on the basis of tirthas and other places of pilgrimage. A book published in the 1990s by the RSS, with the convoluted title of Punya-bhoomi Bharat (Introduction to map of the sacred land Bharat) explicitly attests to this:

The elements of the national unity of Bharat are present in ample measure in its history, geography, religion, philosophy and culture. The sight and touch of the rivers on the banks of which our forefathers created literature that became the standard of human civilisation, the mountain caves which were honoured by the penance of the sages and the lakes that bear testimony to their accomplishment cleanses the mind and body of all sin and suffering. A journey to these places of pilgrimage which enables one to have a glimpse of the place situated in the far corners of the land, the consciousness of every particle of the country being sacred, the feeling of intimacy towards the fellow-countrymen generated by witnessing a common cultural behaviour everywhere, the coming together of the people of the entire country at big fairs like the Khumba fair, the spiritual awakening brought about by the saints and teachers travelling to distant places in the country and the common values of life adopted all over the country – all these make our country deathless as a nation. To make everyone in our nation realise this, it is necessary that every citizen of Bharat be familiarised with its rivers and mountains which are nature’s boon, with its places of pilgrimage and with the great memorials of its ancestors (Sharma 1993: 3–4).

The author then lists all the national places of pilgrimage: the seven holy cities, given that they are ‘situated in different directions and different parts of the country, act as links in the bond of unity of the Nation. Every citizen of Bharat, to whichever caste, sect or state he might belong, always feels desirous to visit these (seven) cities with a sense of devotion’ (ibid.: 29); the twelve jyotirlingam which ‘are spread all over the country: they symbolize the nation’s unity’ (ibid.: 36); the watering holes that have ‘inspired the entire people of Bharat to rise above the distinctions of caste and region and be strong as a nation’ (ibid.: 15).

The conception of territory conveyed by Hindu nationalist propaganda thus does not aim to reconstitute India as it was prior to Partition (Assayag 1998:126), even if this Akhand Bharat (Undivided India) remains one of the obsessional utopias of the movement, but above all to develop a national solidarity. Wherefore the importance given to rituals that allow social convergence, even bonding into a national whole. This desire to get beyond social divisions – especially beyond caste – is as old as Hindu nationalism itself. For the founding fathers of this movement, caste is indeed a divisive factor for Hindus in the face of Muslims, a minority whose strength– even
superiority – is attributed to a keen sense of fraternity. RSS shakhas thus aim to be the melting pot of a homogeneous and united nation. But alongside this far-sighted mechanism, certain Hindu institutions seem to have appeared to Hindutva leaders as endowed with particular leverage. Pilgrimage has been reinterpreted by them in this perspective.

The analysis I have expounded elsewhere regarding Hindu processions can serve here as a starting point (Jaffrelot 1998). Hindu processions are in some respect mini-pilgrimages organised each year to celebrate a deity. Most often, the faithful accompany a palanquin or draw a chariot with wooden wheels carrying the figure of a god or a goddess that has been taken out of the temple and bring it back after having performed a long circumambulation or dipped it in a nearby watercourse or pool. Processions have two features that are found on a larger scale in a pilgrimage. First of all, they are socially inclusive, in other words all castes – or almost11 – take part in them: social structures are effaced to leave room for a ‘bonding group’ all the more so since music, chants and dances maintain great fervour, even collective fever. Secondly, procession demarcates a space which, as a result, is associated exclusively with the (Hindu) community: the advancing group asserts its dominance over the perimeter which ends up taking on the features of a sacred space. These two characteristics – the consolidation of a group by erasing internal cleavages and the clear delimitation of the contours of this group with respect to the outside – have made processions one of the institutions Hindu nationalists are most eager to exploit. As early as the late nineteenth century, one of their first leaders, B. G. Tilak, worked to transform processions in the honour of the god Ganesh into a Hindu activist event (Kaur 2004). In time, processions would even become displays of strength aiming to spark communal violence: planning a procession route to pass in front of a mosque at the hour of prayer was thus to become one of the favourite provocation rituals of Hindu nationalists starting in the 1920s. Already at that time the aim was to polarise the electorate in such a way as to heighten Hindu awareness among the majority community so that it voted for Hindu nationalist parties.

The integrating virtues of pilgrimage are even greater than those of a procession given that the social dimension, its inclusiveness, is reinforced by its virtually pan-Indian dimension: pilgrimage covers a space that is no longer only local, but may coincide with the entire breadth of the Hindu civilisational area. Indeed, as noted above, certain pilgrimages link together the four corners of India. What can be more precious for a political force that aspires to construct an ethnic nation rooted in some religious soil?

The Ekatmata Yatra or the creation of a nationwide network

Rather than mobilising the nation by touring its circumference, Hindu activists were to invent a sort of national pilgrimage that leaves from the four corners of Hindu civilisation and converges toward a centre, the symbol of the ‘national’ unity they defend. This model was first experimented in 1983,
at a time when the Hindu nationalist movement was increasingly divided between its political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – Indian People’s Party, which tried to project a moderate brand of Hindu politics – and the RSS, which promoted an undiluted version of Hindutva. Yatra politics became part of the latter’s strategy.

The RSS offshoot that implemented it was the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP–Universal Hindu Association), which had been created in 1964 to federate the various sects of Hinduism and that the RSS entrusted with creating a new nationalist dynamic in the early 1980s, including in the political field. The VHP’s strategy was intended to solicit a ‘Hindu vote’ that should force the parties – starting with the BJP – to take this community into account.

This strategy relied on the manipulation of religious symbols. The VHP was better armed than any other to do so, given the many mahants (priests) and sadhus or sannyasins (ascetics) that it counted among its ranks, be they modern gurus having created their own ashram or heirs of historic and prestigious sampradayas (these spiritual currents claim to descend from a founding guru sometimes dating back to Indian antiquity). In 1983, the VHP inaugurated a new type of pilgrimage, the Ekmatmata Yatra (March for Unity), which started from three high places of Hindu civilisation: the northern cortege went from Katmandu to Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu in the south, the eastern cortege went from Gangasagar in Bengal to Somnath in Gujarat in the west, and the northwestern cortege went from Haridwar to Kanyakumari again in Tamil Nadu. These columns were joined on the way by sixty-nine other, purely regional, corteges before converging on Nagpur, the birthplace and headquarters of the RSS, as well as the geographic centre of India, and then going on their way. The main architect of the Ekmatmata Yatra was the Joint General Secretary of the VHP, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, whose trajectory exemplifies the key role of the RSS cadres in keeping the Sangh parivar (the nebula of the RSS offshoots) together. A pracharak (RSS full-timer) since 1943, he had been appointed secretary of the ABVP (the student union of the RSS in 1960) and then of the Rajasthan unit of the Jana Sangh – the ancestor of the BJP – in 1971, before joining the VHP.12

For the promoters of the Ekmatmata Yatra, this ‘pilgrimage’ epitomised the necessary mixing of populations of India that was seen as the best possible way to strengthen the country’s unity. It pursued the metaphor on a daily basis because each cortege distributed water from the Ganges (at ten rupees for a half-litre) and at the same time got fresh supplies from the rivers that it crossed and the temple basins it flowed along on the way in order to manifest the blending of the waters of India and their fundamental unity. This symbolism met with considerable resonance given the great significance of the water from the Ganges and water in general for Hindus.

Goddess Ganga Mata – Mother Ganges – was in fact represented in her usual form of a mother goddess, and was carried on a palanquin. The VHP
thus reinserted processional features into the context of a pilgrimage, borrowing some of its elements – such as the central role of water – from traditional rituals. For the planners of the *Ektmata Yatra*, the issue was thus to instrumentalise Hindu symbols and practices for purposes of nationalist mobilisation. They made no secret of their intentions, as attests the presentation of their ‘programme’ published in the RSS’ weekly, *The Organiser*:

When the yatras reach their destination at Rameshwaram and Somnath, the khumba [jars] will contain water from all the sacred places, namely the four *Dhams* [Badrinath, Puri, Rameshwaram and Dwarka], the twelve *jyotirlingam* [...] and hundreds of sacred rivers, lakes and wells. (*The Organiser* 23 October 1983: 15).

The commentary of VHP Secretary-General, H.V. Seshadri, was, in a way, even more explicit:

The countless spots of pilgrimages, temples and ashram, which have been now looked upon mainly as symbols of our *Punya Bhoomi* – a holy land – have now acquired a new and vital emphasis: they are symbols of a common *Matri Bhoomi* [motherland] as well (*ibid*. 15 January 1984: 7).

The VHP achieved its objective beyond all hopes because the *yatra* took on the dimension of a nationwide mass demonstration. According to its figures, 312 corteges instead of the 90 initially planned joined the movement and 4,323 meetings instead of the 1,800 planned were organised. In all, 531 of the 534 districts in the country were affected (*ibid.*, 12 February 1984: 6). Thousands of bottles of water from the Ganges and images of the *Bharat Mata* were sold along the way.13 The Hindu nationalists apparently played successfully on the religious heartstrings of the faithful. The *Ekatmata Yatra* inaugurated a new brand of ethno-religious engineering likely to become more and more political over the course of time.

*The 1990 Rath Yatra, a national pilgrimage*

The *yatras* that followed, indeed, stood out by their increasingly explicit ideological tone. The one held in 1990, the *Rath Yatra*, in this regard performed a transition. Its aim was political. L. K. Advani, the president of the BJP, stated on 12 September that he would undertake this *yatra* between 25 of that month and 30 October to ‘mobilise public opinion’ (*About Us* [BJP bulletin], 7 (18), 18 September 1990). But its form was religious: the term *rath yatra* in the Hindu religion generically refers to processions with chariots (*rath*) that punctuate the life of all sacred places. Unlike the *Ekatmata Yatra*, the *Rath Yatra* had only one main cortege that was supposed to cover the 10,000 km between the two high places of Hinduism, Somnath (Gujarat) – an already very politically connoted *tirtha*14 – and Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) where the Hindu nationalists wanted to replace with a temple a mosque built under the Mogul Empire on a site that they say is the birthplace of the god Rama - a very popular avatar of Vishnu in northern India. The cortege regalia also strove to exhibit religiosity, the *rath* being escorted by activists dressed as
Hanuman (the general of Ram’s armies in the famous Hindu epic, the Ramayana) and women performing the dances of the gopis (cowherds that accompany the god Krishna, another major divinity of Vishnuism), all of this taking place in a highly charged atmosphere amid religious songs and slogans chanted in unison. The ‘pilgrims’ were few, given the small number of those who escorted the Rath along its whole itinerary, but those who attended its passage on the roadside and took part in the meetings held at its halting places were involved in the same collective fervour.

Mixing religion and politics, Advani, the man in the Rath – a Toyota converted into an epic chariot – pursued two Hindu nationalist aims through this mass mobilisation. First, the final destination, Ayodhya, had become the symbol of the majority community’s humiliation ‘under the yoke’ of the Muslim minority. Second, he aspired to unify all the Hindus in a context of increased divisions. In August 1990, Prime Minister V. P. Singh had announced the introduction of a twenty-seven per cent quota in the state postings in favour of the lower castes, as recommended by the Mandal commission, a decision that had fostered resentment among the upper castes and even unprecedented inter-caste tensions. Mobilising Hindus around the Ayodhya issue by using the Rath Yatra was first of all supposed to enable the BJP to reunite the Hindus, its potential electorate, against the Muslim Other. As it was, the Rath Yatra was marred by numerous communal riots which were triggered by Hindu nationalists (Jaffrelot 1998).

The Rath Yatra was one of the greatest mass movements in independent India, so much so that its organisers even compared it to Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March. In Gujarat, the Rath Yatra went through 600 villages and some fifty rallies were held, some of them displaying excessive activism. In Ahmedabad, for instance, a young Hindu nationalist placed a tilak (religious mark indicating what sect the devotee belongs to) on Advani’s forehead made of his own blood, and in Jetpur (Rajkot district), hundreds of others gave him a jar full of their blood as a sign of sacrifice to the Cause. These blood offerings transpose into a Hindu context a Shia practice used in the Moharram ritual. Therein is an additional example of the way the Hindu nationalists end up imitating the Other, the one they stigmatise the most, all the better to rival him.15

In Maharashtra, the frenzy was all the greater since Advani held a rally alongside Bal Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist party with local roots and a radical discourse. He then went to Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, an indication that the movement intended to penetrate into the south where it had little footing. From there the caravan went up to Madhya Pradesh, one of the most rural states in India where peasant mobilisation was reported by the local press in terms that betray their surprise:

Massive crowds turned up at all the places including hamlets and villages to give a warm and vociferous welcome to the Rath Yatra. The people defied the torrential rains and eagerly awaited the arrival of Advani. On both sides of the road thick crowds were standing cheering the Yatra. Many people had come with Trishul [tridents, symbol of Shiva indicating a form of activism that borders on aggressivity] and reverentially
bowed before the Yatra. Slogans were raised expressing their full support to the building of the Ram temple *(National Mail* (Bhopal), 8 October 1990).

One of the slogans invented by the crafters of this movement had particular resonance: ‘Say with pride that we are Hindus!’ (‘Garv se kaho, ham Hindu hein!’). In Rajasthan, where the caravan next went, a new slogan appeared: ‘Advani, you drive us! We’re with you. Begin the building of the temple! We are your hands.’

Little by little, special envoys for the national press even began to gauge the scope of popular mobilisation. Sent to Haryana, a state neighbouring Delhi, the correspondent for *Indian Express* reported in one of his articles:

At every village all along its route . . . crowds ranging from hundreds to thousands turned out to see him. In the towns they clambered on to roofs to catch a glimpse of the bespectacled man on the ‘Rath’. In villages they perched on trees, conches blew and brightly decked women performed repeated ‘arti’ [ritual accomplished with a lamp] (*Indian Express*, 14 October 1990).

Advani never arrived at Ayodhya, for on 23 October 1990, Prime Minister V. P. Singh authorised the head of the Bihar government, Laloo Prasad Yadav, a lower caste leader who had campaigned in favour of quotas, to arrest him when he crossed the border to enter the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh. This decision reinforced the determination of many activists. Some – approximately 40,000 of them – made it to Ayodhya despite the police barricades. They stormed the mosque, prompting law-enforcement agents to severe repression that left about thirty dead.

The martyrs’ ashes were carried in procession throughout India during an *Asthi Kalash Yatra* (pilgrimage of ashes and bones) that was punctuated by many riots. At the same time, Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, organised a *Sadhbhavana Yatra*, or pilgrimage for harmony among religious communities. *Yatras* were becoming a permanent element in the Indian political landscape.

The BJP has tried to cash in on the success of the *Rath Yatra* to make *yatra* politics a permanent feature of its strategy. Advani’s successor as BJP president, M. M. Joshi, organised in 1991 an *Ekta Yatra* (Unity pilgrimage), 15,000 km long from Kanyakumari (at the southern tip of India) to Srinagar where he raised the Indian flag to demonstrate Kashmir’s attachment to Bharat Mata (Mother India). Then the *Janadesh Yatra* (All India pilgrimage) took four top leaders of the party from Mysore, Porbandar, Calcutta and Jammu to Bhopal in 1993. Three years later, Advani’s *Suraj Rath Yatra* (Justice pilgrimage) crossed India for thirty-five days. The following year his *Rashtra Bhakti hi Teerth Yatra* (Pilgrimage of patriotism) lasted two months. Finally, the *Suraksha Yatra* (Security pilgrimage) was organised in early 2006, again by Advani, to protest against the government’s powerlessness in the face of jihadists’ attacks. The religious features in which *yatra* politics was previously cloaked gradually eroded away.

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None of these yatras was as successful as the Ekatomata Yatra and the Rath Yatra. This decline in popularity may be attributed to a certain fatigue vis-à-vis an overworked formula. But it also had something to do with the religious overtone of the two most popular yatras so far, in a context, that is true, dominated by anti-Muslim resentment and the anti-Mandal agitation. Certainly, the Hindutva forces had been able to recast an old institution – the pilgrimage – in a more attractive way when religious symbols were at stake. Yet, one must not exaggerate the impact of such an instrumentalisation either.

The limits of instrumentalisation

Hindu nationalist leaders have developed a strategy of political pilgrimage to mobilise the masses behind them by manipulating religious symbols that carry a strong emotional potential. They do not make any mystery of it and even look at this strategy as being as old as India. Narrating Advani’s ‘Patriotic pilgrimage’, one of his lieutenants, Sudheendra Kulkarni, makes it clear:

For the common folk, yatra was a religious obligation through which they unconsciously became aware of the bond that held them together. For the spiritual seers, social reformers and often, progressive political leaders, it was a conscious medium of people’s education and mobilization (Kulkarni 2004: 19–20; italics as in the original).

According to Kulkarni, yatra politics was a deliberate attempt at creating nationalist sentiments in the people by manipulating religious feelings.

In the course of fieldwork I did in 1990 in northern India I noticed that many villagers had joined the Rath Yatra in order to participate in building the temple to Ram, in the Kar Seva. Interviews I conducted in 1991 in the village of Piparsod in Madhya Pradesh, which I had already visited three times over the preceding years, allowed me to confirm that peasants from the lower castes (including untouchables) and Brahmans had joined the Rath Yatra ‘for Bhagwan Ram’ (Lord Ram). One of the lower caste peasants who had done so for this reason had participated ‘mandir ka nirman ke lye’ (in order to build the temple), whereas he did not even vote for the BJP. In the nearby town, Shivpuri, one of the VHP cadres exhibited a stone from the Babri Masjid that he called prasad (leftover of the sacred food offered to god) in front of fascinated sympathisers.

Alongside these ‘devotees’, many Hindus participated in the Rath Yatra out of a taste for adventure and out of a desire for social recognition, to defy the authorities and accomplish a sacred – and therefore prestigious – exploit by the religious nature of this undertaking. The case of women is especially interesting. The Indian press has, in retrospect, underscored the massive participation of women in the Ekatomata Yatra (The Organiser, 27 November 1983: 13) and the Rath Yatra (Statesman (Delhi), 18 and 19 May 1991). Journalists have systematically attributed it to the religiosity of Hindu women who, certainly, are still the custodians of tradition in India. This interpretation is probably valid to a great extent. But one should not neglect the a-religious...
and nevertheless deep motivations of some of the women who took part in the *Rath Yatra*. To many of them, this event provided a unique occasion to act in a public space to which Hindu women generally do not have access (Gold 1988: 304). While Hindu women are generally confined to the domestic sphere, this time they could legitimately take to the street, using as an argument the sacred nature of the focus of the procession-like demonstration, Ram. They could thereby gain an unprecedented slice of freedom, especially when they were members of one of the organisations that the Hindu nationalists had created to mobilise women. As early as 1936, the RSS had founded a female branch, the *Rashtrasevika Samiti*, whose conservative ethos primarily promoted women’s role as pillar of the traditional joint family. In the 1980s, the VHP also created a women’s wing which aimed to attract young Hindu women, the *Durga Vahini*, the Durga Brigades, from the name of the goddess Durga, the goddess of destruction often represented with a necklace of skulls, tongue hanging, crimson, bloodied weapons in hand and riding a tiger. These *Durga Vahini* recruited young Hindu women who harboured some taste for action. The movement’s members moreover underwent training in martial arts and could even be versed in the use of firearms on the pretence of self-defence training (against possible attackers, naturally Muslims).

According to Tanika Sarkar, the Hindu nationalist movement, while continuing to promote women’s maternal role, also offers them other channels of expression and real means of emancipation. It ‘does enable a specific and socially crucial group of middle class women in moving out of their homebound existence, to reclaim public spaces and even to acquire a political identity and gives them access to serious intellectual cogitation’ (Sarkar 1993: 24).

Taking a more specific interest in the activist youth from the urban middle class to which Sarkar refers here, Paola Bacchetta goes further, drawing on a field study conducted in Ahmedabad (Gujarat). The young woman she describes in detail in a well-known article ‘was attempting to create for herself a new structural position to occupy: that of a perpetually single but tough and respected woman who would impose herself in the public space without definite sexual, gender, or (Indian) regional connotations’ (Bacchetta 1993: 43). The impact of the Hindu nationalist movement on the women of the majority community was naturally amplified by the action of some of this movement’s leaders. Two *sadhvi* (women ascetics), Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti, disciples of famous gurus and wearing the saffron robe, were ardent champions of the agitation in the 1980s and 1990s in favour of the Ayodhya Temple. For Amrita Basu,

> It may be liberating for women, who are continuously enjoined to be decorous, to be praised for their good citizenship when they deliver loud, angry and coarse public speeches . . . Their use of vulgar expression and their ability to address men with familiarity and condescension transgress traditional gender roles and expresses both their anger and their power (Basu 1993: 29).
In such a context, the *Rath Yatra* acted as a catalyst. It was easy for Hindu women to mobilise and gather on the roadside as a cortege went by or at the foot of the tribunes meeting after meeting. There they found a space of liberty and developed a new sociability. And to prove that all that was possible thanks to Ram, the sacred aim of the movement, they made it a point of honour to offer their *mangalsutra* to L. K. Advani. Beyond that, the *Rath Yatra* was the opportunity to give unprecedented praise for the audacity shown women implicated in the Hindu nationalist movement. Thus the movement’s leaders celebrated the escape of Uma Bharti, placed under house arrest after she had attempted to break through the barricades blocking access to the roads of Ayodhya. Some women used this new margin for manoeuvre by emulating such heroic achievements. In Madhya Pradesh, the VHP leader told anyone who would listen that on the way to Ayodhya he had met a group of female villagers aged thirty-five to forty who had asked him with much determination the way to *parikrama*, literally the ‘circumambulation’ by which the Ayodhya pilgrimage ends every year. Moonje gave it to them. A few days later, he saw them again, having turned back. They then told him that they had come under fire from the police guarding the Babri Masjid and helped those who had been wounded. And now, he said to conclude his story, they were returning home to take care of their children. One of the women who had gone to Ayodhya for the *Kar Seva* was decorated by the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh for her bravery (*Dainik Jagaran* (Hindi), 16 November 1990: 10).

If so many women took part in the *Rath Yatra* and some of them even in the final assault against the Babri Masjid, they sometimes mobilised for reasons other than merely worshipping Ram – to gain a certain autonomy. But this use of pilgrimage was only possible due to the quality of *communitas* attached to the Hindu pilgrimage. This feature translates not only through the erasure of caste distinctions, but also by the erosion of gender-related statuses. More precisely, women are justified in participating in this public activity that is pilgrimage because in these circumstances they enjoy religious legitimacy. Owen Lynch thus notes that at the pilgrimage to Mathura, Krishna’s birthplace, ‘Women often come without male relatives to chaperone them’ (Lynch 1988: 174). The traditional pilgrimage offered a certain space of relative liberty for women, and the Hindu nationalist yatras attracted some of them not only for their religious content and their political message, but for personal motivations.

The attitude of the Shiv Sena women of Bombay can be analysed in the same way. As Atreyee Sen convincingly argues, ‘poor women in the slums of Mumbai who supported the political right were not Hindu fundamentalist women passively mobilised by a party into the ascendant nationalist wave’ (Sen 2007: 41); they had their ‘own rationale for supporting the pan-Indian cause of Hindutva, which was related to their growing aspiration to maintain links with rural women [those of their family with whom they did not have much left in common except religion], legitimise female militancy in their...
localities and carve out a visible public role for women’ (ibid.: 23). They asserted themselves in this manner at the time of the Ayodhya movement, like the Durga Vahini volunteers.

The mobilising potential of Hindu nationalist yatras such as the Ekatamata Yatra and the Rath Yatra can first be explained by the affinities these political events have with traditional pilgrimages, bearing out the essential criteria of Turner’s model: Hindu pilgrimage defines a sacred space that is also a civilisational area and those who partake in them form a communitas, within which differences in social status are blurred for a certain, limited time, to make way for solidarity among individuals. These two features clearly lend themselves to a Hindu nationalist usage. By characterising Indian territory on the basis of Hindu tirthas, the Hindu nationalists put forth an ethnic definition of the nation at odds with the universalistic doctrine enshrined in India’s Constitution. Inventing a form of Hindu individualism by bringing together pilgrims having shed intermediary bodies such as caste, an impediment to the birth of a Hindu Rashtra, supplies the heralds of the Hindutva with the raw material that enables them to build the sort of nation they aspire to, all the more so since the pilgrims on their yatras, like those who participate in traditional pilgrimages and processions, are driven by a particular fervour that recalls the radicalism mentioned by Turner with regard to the Crusades and the Jihad: grace can change into violence, and Hindu corteges have certainly been the preferred vehicles for communal riots.

Although Hindu nationalists have sought to use features of pilgrimage that could help them get people out in the street, the analysis should not stick to this strictly instrumentalist interpretation, for citizens do not always shift into action for the same reasons for which instigators seek to mobilise them. In the case at hand, participants in the Ekatamata Yatra and the Rath Yatra took part for reasons other than those contemplated by the organisers. Some women, in particular, were there not by virtue of any religious or ideological sentiment, but to seize the occasion to appear for ostensibly legitimate reasons in a public space from which they are often banned. The autonomy of these ‘subalterns’ partly explains that once the Hindu nationalist yatras took on an increasingly open secular dimension, they ceased to attract masses of citizens.

Notes
2 I am most grateful to Hema Rairkar for this information.
3 Guy Deleury’s account regarding the same pilgrimage bears out this interpretation (1960: 103).
4 See also Feldhaus (2003).
5 Eck fittingly adds: ‘Although in practice the egalitarianism one finds in the text has not invariably been upheld, it remains the ideal of the Dharmashastra tradition’ (Ibid.: 339).
6 It should moreover be pointed out that at major pilgrimage sites, the faithful have their name—a mark of individuality if there is one—recorded in huge ledgers so that their merits can be recognised (Bharati 1963: 138).
7 Such quest can take various forms. The purpose of the pilgrimage to Benares, for instance, is primarily to expiate one’s sins (Parry 1981: 345).
8 Peter Van der Veer’s study on the Ayodhya pilgrimage is very instructive here. The author points out that such activity ‘depends on a network of guru-disciple relations, which are not based upon caste-distinctions, but on free, personal choice’ (Van der Veer 1984: 65).
9 I have studied the genesis of Hindu nationalism in the first chapter of Jaffrelot (1996).
10 For more details on this point, see Jaffrelot (2004).
11 Olivier Herrenschmidt has aptly shown that Brahmins and Untouchables never take part in a procession together: one or the other is always missing and so there are only ‘partial totalisations’.
12 Interview with Acharya Giriraj Kishore, 11 February 1994, New Delhi.
13 Along the road from Katmandu to Rameshwaram alone, 6,000 representations of Bharat Mata and 70,000 bottles of water were sold (Dharma Marg, 2(3), October 1984: 40).
14 The Somnath temple had been sacked and destroyed by Muslim invaders during the Muslim era before being restored by the Indian government on the initiative of Vice Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel in a spirit of Hindu activism. In 1951, the President of the Indian republic, Rajendra Prasad, another Hindu traditionalist, had placed jyotirlingam in the sacrosanct heart of the temple.
15 On this strategy of stigmatising and imitating the Other, see chapter 1 of Jaffrelot (1996).
16 The mangalsutra is the necklace Hindu women receive as part of the marriage ceremony.
17 Uma Bharti’s partisans pointed out that her cutting her hair better to go unnoticed was further proof of her determination (Datta 1991: 62).
18 Interview with M. Moonje, 12 October 1991, in Bhopal.
19 The Caurasi kos parikrama is a circumambulation of Braj, an area around Agra, Mathura and Vrindavan.

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