



Research Paper

Neo-Hinduism and the Construction of Sanatan Dharma: Cultural Continuity or Political Reinvention?

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the evolving concept of Sanatan Dharma within the framework of Neo-Hinduism and interrogates whether its contemporary articulation signifies a cultural continuity rooted in ancient traditions or a politically motivated reinvention. While Sanatan Dharma historically referred to the eternal moral order in classical Hindu philosophy, its modern redefinition under Neo-Hindu thought mainly by thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Aurobindo etc. transformed it into a symbol of religious unity and national identity. The paper explores how this transformation was initially positioned as a counter discourse to colonial narratives that portrayed Hinduism as fragmented and irrational. Yet, in contemporary India Sanatan Dharma has increasingly become central to the rhetoric of cultural nationalism promoted by organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and political entities that seek to consolidate Hindu identity under a monolithic framework. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that includes sociological theory, discourse analysis, historical contextualization the article argues that the invocation of Sanatan Dharma in present-day socio-political discourse reflects a deliberate ideological shift. Rather than being a neutral cultural continuity, it often functions as an 'invented tradition' a selective and strategic reconstruction of the past aimed at legitimizing current political objectives. This shift has significant implications for secularism, minority rights and the pluralistic fabric of Indian society. The paper concludes by calling for a nuanced understanding of Sanatan Dharma that respects its diverse philosophical roots while remaining vigilant about its politicization.

Keywords: Neo-Hinduism, Sanatan Dharma, cultural nationalism, Hindutva, religious identity, invented tradition, India.

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I. Introduction

Sanatan Dharma, literally understood as the 'eternal dharma' has been presented in classical Hindu scriptures and commentarial traditions ranging from the Bhagavad Gītā through the Manusmṛti to medieval Dharmaśāstra digests as an overarching moral and cosmological order whose prescriptive power derives from its claim to sustain the universe by harmonizing individual conduct with ritual, social and metaphysical principles (Guénon 1921/2004). During the colonial encounter however, Sanatan Dharma simultaneously served as a self-ascriptive ethnonym among reformist Hindu newspapers, Sanskrit revival societies, early nationalist orators who mobilised its universalist semantics to rebut orientalist characterisations of Hinduism as superstitious and fragmented thereby transforming an esoteric doctrinal idiom into a broad cultural banner. Notwithstanding such homogenising rhetoric, ethnographic records and regional bhakti hagiographies reveal persistent pluralities of sectarian practice, caste-bound ritual repertoires and vernacular theologies that complicate any essentialist claim that Sanatan Dharma has functioned historically as a unitary pan-Indian faith (Trautmann 1997). Neo-Hinduism variously labelled Neo-Vedānta or Hindu modernism crystallised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Aurobindo creatively synthesised Advaitic metaphysics with liberal universalism, Protestant ethical sensibilities and nationalist aspirations to articulate a rational, socially engaged with globally exportable Hindu identity (Halbfass 1988; Hacker 1950/2004). Although these reformers proclaimed Sanatan Dharma to be eternally inclusive, their rhetorical strategy deliberately foregrounded a textual canon, a myth of civilisational continuity and a discourse of moral uplift that

could counter Christian missionary critiques while simultaneously legitimising emergent Hindu political organisations such as the Arya Samaj and subsequently the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (McKean 1996; Damle 1987). Building on this genealogy the present study asks whether the twenty-first-century deployment of Sanatan Dharma in Indian public culture represents an organic extension of pre-colonial cosmology or, instead, constitutes a politically motivated reinvention that selectively curates the past to buttress majoritarian identity claims and electoral strategies. The stakes of this inquiry are underscored by contemporary controversies surrounding curriculum revisions, temple restitution campaigns, legislative debates where politicians explicitly equate constitutional citizenship with allegiance to Sanatan Dharma thereby conflating religious orthodoxy with national loyalty and provoking anxieties among religious minorities and secular critics. Equally salient are pedagogical frontiers as textbook committees influenced by cultural-nationalist lobbies increasingly frame ancient Indian history through the lens of Sanatan Dharma, a move critics argue marginalises subaltern narratives and compresses the diverse epistemic traditions of Buddhism, Jainism, tribal cosmologies and Islam into a monolithic civilisational teleology (Sharma 2019; Jaffrelot & Shah 2023). Methodologically, the paper applies sociological discourse analysis to parliamentary speeches, party manifestos, movement periodicals and school textbooks triangulated with secondary historiography thereby situating textual representations of Sanatan Dharma within wider fields of power and reception constituted by media ecologies and grassroots mobilisations. Analytically, Durkheim's notion of collective conscience elucidates how sacred symbols mediate social cohesion, Weber's theory of the routinisation of charisma explains the institutional crystallisation of prophetic authority, Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony clarifies the diffusion of Sanatan idioms through state and civil society, and Hobsbawm's analysis of invented traditions foregrounds the political work performed by ostensibly ancient rituals and slogans (Durkheim 1912/1995; Weber 1947; Gramsci 1971; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). The conceptual dialogue also engages Benedict Anderson's thesis of imagined communities to highlight how liturgical metaphors and territorial aspirations converge in contemporary narratives that subtend Sanatan Dharma's re-emergence as a religio-national emblem (Anderson 1983). By weaving together these theoretical strands and empirical materials, the introduction justifies the ensuing analysis and sets the agenda for reassessing whether contemporary invocations of Sanatan Dharma should be interpreted primarily as faithful transmissions of an enduring religious core or as strategically curated narratives that recalibrate the relationship between spirituality, citizenship, and power in twenty-first-century India.

Historical and Philosophical Roots of 'Sanatan Dharma'

Sanatan Dharma as articulated in classical Hindu philosophical and scriptural traditions originates from the Vedas and finds continued elaboration in later textual canons such as the Upanishads, Smritis, Itihasas and Puranas where it is conceived not as a sectarian religion but as an eternal and all-encompassing *ṛta*-based moral order underlying cosmic and social harmony (Flood, 1996; Bhattacharyya, 2012). While the Rigveda articulates cosmic principles through hymns directed at universal deities and the later Dharmaśāstra texts such as the Manusmṛti (c. 200 BCE–200 CE) attempt to codify varna-dharma and ritual hierarchy, these sources reflect idealized prescriptions rather than the empirical complexity of lived Hindu practice across India's spatial and cultural expanse (Olivelle, 2004; Doniger & Smith, 1991). Contrary to the assumption of a doctrinal monolith, the history of Hindu religiosity demonstrates remarkable regional and sectarian diversity encompassing Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Smārta and local tribal cosmologies with significant variations in ritual forms, theological emphases and caste-based exclusions or privileges that resist easy integration under the homogenizing rubric of 'Sanatan Dharma' (Fuller, 2004; Babb, 1975). For example goddess worship in Tamil Nadu, bhakti poetry in Maharashtra, tantric rituals in Assam etc. reflect ontological and ethical commitments that deviate from Brahmanical orthodoxy while still claiming to be dharmic traditions, thus illustrating the internal pluralism and decentralized structure of classical Hindu practice (Davis, 1991; Lorenzen, 1995). The Puranic corpus, particularly texts like the Bhagavata Purana popularized devotionism (bhakti) while simultaneously co-opting regional myths and deities into a Sanskrit moral universe thereby broadening the semantic field of dharma beyond rigid Vedic ritualism (Matchett, 2001; Hardy, 1983). While philosophical schools such as Vedānta, Nyāya, and Sāṅkhya debated metaphysical absolutes and paths to liberation, they rarely agreed on a singular doctrinal truth further emphasizing the epistemic plurality within the classical formulation of Sanatan Dharma (Radhakrishnan, 1923; Halbfass, 1988). Moreover, caste-based prescriptions regarding food, marriage, purity, temple access etc. found even in sacred law texts indicate the structural inequality embedded in dharmic orthopraxy which undermines modern assertions that Sanatan Dharma historically functioned as an egalitarian or universalist religious identity (Bayly, 1999). In this way while Sanatan Dharma was classically understood as a metaphysical order rooted in timeless principles, the historical record underscores its accommodation of profound theological, ritualistic and sociological diversity that resists any modern effort to reduce it to a singular, uniform system.

Neo-Hinduism and the Reformulation of Hindu Identity

Neo-Hinduism emerged in late-nineteenth-century India when charismatic reformers such as Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Sri Aurobindo strategically re-interpreted classical

metaphysics through the prism of Western liberalism, German idealism, Victorian moralism etc. in order to answer orientalist charges that Hinduism was irrational, idolatrous and socially stagnant, thereby inaugurating a vigorous discursive project to rehabilitate Sanatan Dharma as the ethical nucleus of a modern yet indigenous civilizational identity (Halbfass, 1988; King, 1999; Minor, 1986). Responding to the Macaulayan educational reforms and Christian missionary polemics, Dayananda's Arya Samaj foregrounded a monotheistic reading of the R̥g Veda while rejecting image worship and hereditary priesthood asserting that Sanatan Dharma represented a pristine monotheism corrupted by priest-craft which if recovered through śuddhi (purification) rituals and vernacular Vedic preaching, could arrest mass conversions and morally regenerate Hindu society (Jordens, 1998; Pandey, 2006). Vivekananda conversely universalised Advaitic non-dualism before global audiences at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions recasting Hinduism as a spiritually elastic and rational tradition compatible with modern science and deploying Sanatan Dharma as a trans-sectarian emblem that fused yoga, service (*seva*) and nationalism into an affective repertoire for middle-class Hindu self-fashioning (Killingley, 2015; Rambachan, 2014). Sri Aurobindo synthesised evolutionary metaphysics and anti-colonial activism arguing that India's destiny lay in manifesting a 'spiritual nationalism' where Sanatan Dharma would guide the collective ascent toward a supramental consciousness thereby imbuing political emancipation with eschatological significance and legitimising armed resistance as sacrificial tapas (Heehs, 2002). In the Marathi heartland, Tilak invoked the Bhagavad Gītā's doctrine of niṣkāma karma to promote festival-based mobilisation such as the public Ganesha celebrations, popularising an idiom of disciplined civic activism that sacralised territorial patriotism and recast disjointed caste publics into an imagined Hindu nation under the aegis of Sanatan Dharma (Thapar, 2004). Across these reformulations Sanatan Dharma functioned as a moral counter-narrative to Victorian evangelicals by claiming an immutable, universal ethos older than Christianity, the reformers simultaneously refuted charges of polytheistic superstition and asserted cultural parity with the West while re-centring Brahmanical canons and marginalising folk, Dalit, Adivasi practices deemed incompatible with a purified Hindu modernity (Baird, 2001; Viswanathan, 2010). Institutional embodiments of this project appeared in the Arya Samaj's gurukulas, the Ramakrishna Mission's transnational service networks and later the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh whose founders borrowed Vivekananda's muscular spirituality and Tilak's festival politics to engineer a disciplined cadre system that translated metaphysical unity into everyday corporeal regimentation thereby consolidating Sanatan Dharma as both theological doctrine and political habitus (Andersen & Damle, 1987; McKean, 1996). By conflating the spiritual vocabulary of dharma with the idioms of territorial sovereignty these movements articulated the category of 'Hindu Rashtra' arguing that India's national essence resided in the timeless truths of Sanatan Dharma, a formulation that re-imagined citizenship as a sacred duty and located moral legitimacy in scriptural antiquity rather than secular constitutionalism (Jaffrelot, 2007; Sharma, 2011). Such confluences yet involved selective textual retrieval and strategic silences Vedāntic universalism was foregrounded while heterodox schools, vernacular goddess cults, anti-caste bhakti voices were subsumed under a homogenising narrative of civilisational unity, illustrating what Hobsbawm terms the 'invention of tradition' whereby putative antiquity masks recent political exigencies (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Dalmia & Stietencron, 1995). Consequently, Neo-Hinduism's reformulation of Hindu identity institutionalised a double movement cosmopolitan appeal abroad through a universalist Sanatan Dharma and inward consolidation at home via organisations emphasising ritual purity, Sanskritic normativity, corporeal disciplinewhich continues to shape contemporary debates on secularism, minority rights, and the contested meanings of Indian nationhood.

Political Reinvention in Contemporary India

The post-liberalization phase of Indian politics has witnessed an assertive Hindutva project in which leading organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and their parliamentary arm the Bharatiya Janata Party have strategically reframed Sanatan Dharma from a diffuse metaphysical notion into a dense ideological marker of civilizational sovereignty thereby translating esoteric theological language into an exclusionary grammar of national belonging that privileges upper-caste Hindu subjectivities while repositioning minorities as cultural outsiders (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 2007). Employing an intricate regime of symbolic production, these groups orchestrate textbook committees, prime-time news channels, social-media ecosystems etc. to disseminate narratives that depict India's past as an unbroken continuum of Sanatan values heroically resisting foreign depredation, a historiographical move that marginalizes Buddhist heterodoxy, Bhakti egalitarianism, subaltern tribal cosmologies in favor of a sanitized Brahmanical teleology (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 2012). Content analyses of revised National Council of Educational Research and Training history texts show deliberate excisions of caste atrocities and communal pogroms replacing them with idyllic representations of varṇa harmony, thus re-coding social inequality as divine cosmic order while inculcating students with a homogenized patriotic ethos that equates citizenship with ritual conformity (Sharma, 2019). Parallel to these televised political speeches by senior BJP leaders mobilize epic motifs from Rama's righteous kingship to Krishna's dharmic counsel to naturalize contemporary policy agendas, rendering dissent against majoritarian legislation intelligible only as profanation of an 'eternal' cultural mandate, thereby conflating mythology with statecraft in a populist semiotic loop (Nussbaum, 2008; Adcock, 2014). The Ayodhya movement

crystallizes these strategies by reinterpreting the Rāmāyana as historical reportage and projecting the Babri Masjid site as the natal locus of Hindu nationhood, activists fashioned a visual repertoire of kar sevaks, saffron flags, sacred bricks that re-sacralized territorial space while legitimizing spectacular violence as ritual restoration (Basu et al., 1993). Subsequent Supreme Court adjudications were celebrated in choreographed temple-foundation ceremonies broadcast live across vernacular channels underscoring how media spectacle fuses devotional affect with juridical triumph to construct a shared emotive community that experiences legal verdicts as theophanic vindications of Sanatan Dharma (Guha, 2007; Thapar, 2004). Beyond grand events, routine cultural policies ranging from gaushala subsidies to Sanskrit week celebrations extend the state's sacral mandate into everyday bureaucratic practice normalizing Hindu ritual categories within governance frameworks under the guise of heritage preservation and moral uplift (Bhatt, 2001; Vanaik, 2017). The ideological consolidation yet exacts sociological costs ethnographic studies from Gujarat, Odisha, Jharkhand etc. reveal that Dalit and Adivasi communities confronting vigilante cow-protection squads and temple-entry prohibitions are compelled either to internalize caste-Hindu norms for symbolic acceptance or to risk social and economic boycotts, illustrating how the homogenizing discourse of Sanatan unity reinscribes hierarchies it claims to transcend (Engineer, 1995; Narayan, 2021). Likewise, minority faiths encounter curricular erasures and legislative surveillance exemplified by 'love-jihad' laws and citizenship registers which securitize Muslim and Christian identities through the juridical language of demographic threat and civilizational loyalty tests, thereby situating Sanatan Dharma at the normative center of a revised social contract. The cumulative effect is a discursive field where dissenting Hindus, secular theorists and marginalized castes are labeled antinational, their claims to pluralistic citizenship delegitimized by the hegemonic claim that Sanatan Dharma predates, supersedes and therefore should regulate the constitutional imagination a quintessential example of what Hobsbawm identifies as the 'invention of tradition' operating as a political technology of historical authentication (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Dalmia & Stietencron, 1995). Consequent to these contemporary India's political reinvention of Sanatan Dharma entangles mythic time with electoral time deploying carefully curated symbols, selectively edited scriptures, corporatized devotional spectacles to produce a majoritarian public sphere wherein plural sects, non-Hindu traditions and subaltern memories survive only as folkloric residues or securitized anomalies reaffirming Hindutva's ideological project to remake the nation in the purified image of an imagined eternal order.

II. Conclusion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the contemporary deployment of Sanatan Dharma represents a complex interplay of historical continuity and strategic reinvention wherein the conceptual vocabulary of eternal dharma is retained in form while its socio-political function has been significantly reoriented to serve modern ideological and nation-building agendas. In its classical formulation Sanatan Dharma denoted a metaphysical order that governed both cosmic and moral life accommodating a vast plurality of beliefs, sects and practices across regions, castes, linguistic communities. However, as this article has shown, the Neo-Hindu reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati, Aurobindo, Tilak systematically repurposed this notion to create a coherent, internally unified Hindu identity in response to colonial critiques and missionary challenges thereby marking the beginning of its modern ideological transformation. In the post-independence and especially post-liberalization period organizations like the RSS, VHP and BJP have further politicized Sanatan Dharma transforming it from a flexible spiritual principle into a rigid cultural marker of majoritarian citizenship often at the cost of erasing historical complexities and excluding non-Hindu communities. This transformation is not merely discursive but institutional, manifesting through textbook revisions, media narratives, legal interventions, public rituals that sacralize state power while delegitimizing dissent. The symbolic utility of Sanatan Dharma lies in its ability to naturalize political authority by invoking a sacred past allowing ideological agendas to masquerade as moral imperatives. Yet, this very power carries significant risks, the homogenization of Hindu identity under the Sanatan label often involves the suppression of regional, caste-based, tribal, heterodox traditions many of which have historically resisted Brahmanical dominance and offered alternative visions of dharma rooted in social justice, gender equality and ecological balance. Critical engagement with the concept of Sanatan Dharma is not only academically necessary but ethically imperative in this context. Scholars must resist the temptation to treat it as an unproblematic civilizational given and instead approach it as a contested terrain where historical memory, political aspiration and spiritual longing intersect. This calls for more pluralistic interpretations that foreground the multiplicity of voices within the Hindu tradition and make space for subaltern narratives that challenge the hegemonic reinvention of Sanatan Dharma as a singular nationalist identity. Interdisciplinary approaches that combine textual analysis with ethnography, sociology, political theory can help uncover the lived experiences of communities who engage with Sanatan Dharma in ways that defy its politicized representation. Future research should consider comparative frameworks that analyze how other religious traditions have undergone similar processes of ideological reinvention. For example Islamic modernism in the late Ottoman Empire or post-colonial Egypt and Buddhist nationalism in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar offer instructive parallels in how sacred doctrines are

mobilized for state-building, identity consolidation, exclusionary politics. Comparative ethnographic studies could further illuminate how ordinary believers across caste, gender and regional lines internalize, resist or reinterpret the contemporary meanings of Sanatan Dharma. Such work would not only enrich our understanding of Hindu modernity but also contribute to broader debates on religion, identity, the politics of tradition in the global South. In conclusion we can say that Sanatan Dharma today is less a static relic of the past and more a dynamic site of ideological contestation and only through critical, inclusive and interdisciplinary inquiry can its diverse meanings be adequately understood and responsibly engaged.

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