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Asia Research Centre, War Studies University

krzysiwane@gmail.com

IS THE BJP CONSERVATIVE?

IN SEARCH OF INDIA'S CONSERVATIVE PARTY

ABSTRACT

This article will consider whether the Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP), the party currently ruling India, may be considered conservative. The author will use Swapan Dasgupta's 2015 lecture on conservatism as a starting point for further deliberations. While agreeing with some of Dasgupta's points, the author will conclude that the defining elements of Indian conservatism which he had proposed can, at the same time, define Hindu nationalism as well. To find the difference between the two, the text will consider a few historical examples of disputes and cooperation between the parties of the Hindu Right (and between Hindu conservatives and Hindu nationalists in general) such as the issue of the civil code reform, the attitude towards Dalits (untouchables) and the question of monarchy abolition. The final conclusion of the text is that while Hindu nationalism does share certain aspects and goals with Hindu conservatism, it also differs with it on some other points, and thus the BJP is more of a nationalist than a conservative party. It was the Ramrajya Parishad, a small and now defunct party, that in the author's view represented the strand of Hindu conservatism.

Key words: Indian politics, Indian conservatism, Hindu conservatism, Hindu nationalism, Bharatiya Janata Party, Ramrajya Parishad

INTRODUCTION

The research on contemporary Indian political ideologies is uneven in its depth and reach. Hindu nationalism as a political ideology has attracted a lot of attention of scholars but beyond the realm of politics the myriad social activities of Hindu nationalists are not adequately researched in many areas. Even more work is required with regards to Hindu conservatism. This worldview had been analyzed mainly by Erdman who assumed the Swatantra Party to be *the* conservative party of India.¹ Yet, after the period of 1960s-1970s one scarcely finds a research project as focused on Indian/Hindu conservatism as sweeping as the one Erdman had undertaken, at least amongst English-language academic publications. It is thus noteworthy that in 2015 the eminent King's College India Institute invited Swapan Dasgupta, a seasoned Indian journalist and currently a member of Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian Parliament) to speak on Indian conservatism. One can only hope that Dasgupta's lecture will reignite the debate on conservatism in Indian politics (the full text of the lecture is available online).

While I personally disagree with many of Dasgupta's conclusions and would seek a different approach, I found it inspiring to consider and discuss his points. His lecture included many important insights on the nature on conservatism and references to classical texts on conservatism as a political ideology. Thus, this article will seek to address Dasgupta's definition of Indian conservatism but at the same time it will advocate a different definition and will point out to a different political party as an example of a Hindu conservative party. I will also stress the importance of establishing differences and similarities between conservatism and nationalism in the Indian context. I should also stress that while Erdman and Dasgupta spoke of a wider 'Indian conservatism,' in the course of the article I will move on to more narrowly defined 'Hindu conservatism.'

At this point it may be asked if looking for the defining aspects of conservatism has any academic value. Do we need to ask ourselves what conservatism is as a political ideology in order to research conservative parties? In my view, however, asking ourselves questions such as the ones Dasgupta has poised is not only an attempt at reaching definitions. Much more importantly, such debates help us to understand the nature of Indian political thought. While Dasgupta's conclusion was that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a conservative party, my conclusion will be that is not entirely so – and that is what in my view brings us closer to understanding this party and the ideology behind it.

To elaborate on my points, I will mostly compare the political positions of four parties of the Indian Right in the period of 1950s till 1970s: the Hindu Mahasabha, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the Swatantra Party and the Ramrajya Parishad (apart from the Swatantra Party, the other three may also be defined as the parties of the Hindu Right). I will also compare them, where possible, with the current stance of the BJP on some of

¹ Cf. H. Erdman, "Chakravarty Rajagopalachari and Indian Conservatism", *The Journal of Developing Areas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1966), passim; idem, "Conservatism in India", *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1978), passim and idem, *The Swatantra Party and Indian Conservatism*, Cambridge 1967, passim.

the issues. I shall refer to well-known primary and secondary sources on Hindu nationalism, including the RSS mouthpiece, the *Organiser*. I shall also make use of, the old issues of *Sanmārg*, a journal linked to the Ramrajya Parishad party (RRP), and *Mārksvād aur Rāmrajy*, a book brought out by its leader (swami Karpatri) to suggest that this party should be possibly considered closer to a model Hindu conservative party in the Indian context.

DASGUPTA'S DEFINITION OF INDIAN CONSERVATISM

According to Dasgupta, the elements that Indian conservatism as a political ideology should include are: 1. "the preference of community wisdom over individual choice," 2. "the importance attached to the sacred in maintaining life," 3. the belief that "the authority of the state must be circumscribed by the will of society" as a result of which conservatism is inherently suspicious of state-sponsored cultural engineering, 4. the importance of character and self-control and 5. that conservatism "sees itself as an embodiment of the national identity." Indeed, all of these would match the characteristics of the Hindutva ideology professed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which currently rules India. Thus, Dasgupta is of opinion that the BJP is a conservative party and that the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), BJP's predecessor, was a conservative party.² As the BJP is a party outspokenly attached to Hindu traditions, we may assume that in this case could as well mean 'Hindu conservatism' and not 'Indian conservatism'. Moreover as BJP is (and BJS was) tied to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organization, I understand that Dasgupta's view is that the same conservatism is shared by the BJP and RSS alike.

However, I find the same five aspects mentioned by Dasgupta to be fitting both Hindu political conservatism and Hindu nationalism. Are the two, therefore, to be treated as one? If so, then what does Dasgupta's definition offer in terms of analyzing conservatism that did not appear in the academic discourse on nationalism? If these two political strands are separate, what additional aspects should Hindu conservatism carry in order to be discerned from Hindu nationalism? I assume that the answer is not very simple: the two should be treated as neither completely separate nor same.

COMMUNITY WISDOM, FAITH AND THE LIMITED INTERFERENCE OF STATE IN CULTURE

What does a project of political conservatism outlined by Dasgupta actually conserve? I understand that it seeks to protect (1) faith, (2) the prevalence (i.e. some form of control?) of community over the individual and (3) culture (to protect it from state's

² S. Dasgupta, "How Conservative Is Indian Conservatism?", King's College London Youtube Channel, 16 December 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0l_3m4w0Tg>, 23 June 2016.

engagement). A second question arising here is what community is under consideration here. Is it primarily the caste, linguistic group or the nation? At any rate, I understand that the communities considered here are not to be confused with classes (such as laborers). This assumption, together with insistence on faith, unexpectedly leaves out ideologies such as communism out of our scope. I also assume that a "community" should be understood as a traditional group, and a one that has an identity or, more precisely, offers an identity to an individual. Furthermore, if I understand Dasgupta's approach correctly, this factor should be connected with the two other ones (the importance of faith and the non-interference in culture) which would presumably mean that we should primarily focus on castes and religious communities. It is perhaps right to assume that a linguistic community should not be included here: in other words, a party speaking out primarily in defense of the rights or traditions of a linguistic community should not be considered conservative by this account, least that this defense (or other party ideas) was connected somehow to the issues of faith, culture, character or national identity. Yet, a question that remains unanswered is whether a nation is also a community by these standards. If it is, and I feel Dasgupta meant this, then telling the difference between conservatism and nationalism in India becomes more difficult. I shall get back to this issue at the end of the article.

It seems to me that these three foremost factors – the prevalence of community over the individual, the importance of faith and the limiting of the state's interference in culture – often cannot be considered separately. Thus, I will now elaborate a bit on a few historical cases with regards to which these aspects played a role and in which the position of the Hindu conservatives seemed important.

The Hindu civil code reforms

Let me first consider a case that seems perfectly in accordance with Dasgupta's definition at the first glance, but turns out to be more problematic after further considerations. In 1950s, the BJS, the RSS, the RRP and many other Hindu organizations vehemently opposed the progressive reforms of the Hindu civil laws which included changes such as delegitimizing polygamy, giving women full rights to divorce, inheritance and guardianship, etc. All in all, these reforms – halted at first in 1950-1951 but eventually introduced in 1955-56 – were to give greater freedom and more equal legal status to Hindu women while dealing away with a number of religion-related civil customs.³ As a host of Hindu organizations opposed this change, it would seem that at least three of the aspects mentioned by Dasgupta were at work here: the preference of community wisdom over individual choice, the importance attached to the sacred and the belief that "the authority of the state must be circumscribed by the will of society".

At first, the BJS and RSS, the RRP and the third party of the Hindu Right, the Hindu Mahasabha (HM), joined forces to resist the reform, along with a number of Hindu

³ K. Iwanek, A. Burakowski, *Indie. Od kolonii do mocarstwa. 1857-2013*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 210-212.

religious organizations.⁴ A consideration of the points they raised in the heated debate of 1950s supports Dasgupta's claim that "community wisdom" was a central notion to their political ideologies (just like, it may be added, community wisdom was one of the important aspects for American conservatives). The opponents of the Hindu civil code reforms often put the rights, traditions and needs of the Hindu community (communities) above the rights and needs of women. It was being argued, for instance, that solutions such as divorce would be dangerous to the Hindu society, and the Hindu Right did not seem to consider at this point if the Hindu women would like their liberty to be limited for the sake of the declared good of the society. Swami Karpatri for example claimed that women are not completely free; they are "like a creeper plant," they need to find support of men⁵. He also in fact perceived women as the property of men.⁶

Swami Karpatri also pointed out that legal solutions such as divorce were against the Hindu traditions as described in the Shastras (the normative treatises composed in Sanskrit) and against *dharma* (religion, law, and social order).⁷ Similarly N.C. Chatterjee, the then president of the Hindu Mahasabha, pointed out that in Hindu traditions marriage was a sacrament (*sanskār*) and therefore could not be broken by divorce. He also claimed that the adoption of a son by Hindus was a "spiritual concept" because a father needed to have a son who would later offer *pindas* (oblations) to the spirit of the deceased father (and the tradition warranted that only the son could fulfill this religious duty); this point was supposed to counter the reform which would give women equal rights to adoption.⁸ Thus, the notion of "the importance attached to the sacred and the belief" also appeared among the points raised against the reform.

Yet, after it had become obvious that the reforms are irreversible and most of the opposition against them had petered out, the BJS and the RSS decided to advocate for a further push in the reforms, rather than withdrawal. They claimed that the reforms of the Hindu civil code should be extended to cover all the communities – and the Muslim community in particular – to bring about a common civil code in India (also called the "uniform civil code").⁹ The promise of the common civil code had been actually given by the socialist Indian National Congress government in the first place but the government took a step back fearing that this would arouse the Muslim sentiments. Thus, the government decided not to challenge Muslim conservatism but was willing to challenge the Hindu conservatism. The Hindu conservatives and nationalists felt betrayed in a double way: not only the customs of their community were changed but those of the other community were not. Thus, when after the reforms the RSS and BJS

⁴ R. Guha, *India after Gandhi. The History of World's Largest Democracy*, London 2007, pp. 231, 233, 235. These three parties also opposed the reform during the 1950-51 election campaign, when it was already known that the reform was being planned. M. Weiner, *Party Politics in India. The Development of a Multi-Party System*, Princeton 1990, pp. 164-176.

⁵ Karpātriji mahārāj, *Mārksvād aur Rāmrajy*, Gorakhpur n.d., p. 783.

⁶ Ibid., p. 777.

⁷ R. Guha, *India after Gandhi*..., p. 231.

⁸ D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, Princeton 1963, pp. 283-284.

⁹ C. Baxter, *Jana Sangh. A Biography of an Indian Political Party*, New Delhi 1971, pp. 212-213.

decided to push for a uniform civil code, it may be assumed that the rationale of this move was to mobilize the Hindus against the Muslims, as usual in the Hindu nationalist strategy. There are many sources to prove that with regards to this issue the RSS and the BJS gradually adopted the entire repertoire of the rival socialist Indian National Congress. They now spoke of women rights, equality and secularism and pointed out (and still do point out nowadays) that Muslim conservatism is against these values. It cannot be concluded, therefore, that with regards to the common civil code issue, the later position of the RSS and the BJS was informed by the notions of community wisdom, faith and the circumscribing of the role of state in cultural matters.

I should also point out that at time of writing the BJP is attempting at bringing in the uniform civil code, or at least discontinuing some of the traditional civil law customs based on the Muslim traditions and standing apart from the rest of the Indian civil law (such as the “triple talaq” custom). Throughout these endeavors, the BJP is consistently using the idea of the rights of the individual and the rights of women (against that of the community wisdom), of secularism (against that of faith) and of the right of state’s interference in culture for the good of the citizen. In 2016, for instance, the RSS’ English-language mouthpiece, the *Organiser*, carried an article by a senior journalist named R. Venkataraman which pointed out, among others, that the “Uniform Civil Code [...] ensured uniform right to all” and “[s]ince its intended beneficiaries are women in general, it is gender-sensitive and has nothing to do with religion.” The customs of marriage, the author argues, are free to be based on various religious traditions and the uniform civil code should not interfere with them but with regard to the legal solutions such as divorce the Indian state is, in accordance with the Constitution, obliged to make equal laws for all citizens irrespective of their religion and strive for “women’s empowerment.”¹⁰

This stance may be considered a hypocrisy not only because it represents a huge change in comparison to the party’s later position but also because it is aimed at a particular community while in different cases the BJP is still ready to defend the rights of Hindus as matters of faith. All the same, such a position on the civil code is anything but conservative. However, the other parties of the Hindu Right of the 1950s – the Hindu Mahasabha (HM) and the RRP – spoke against state’s engagement in a more consistent way. As late as April 14, 1970, *Sanmārg*’s editorial reminded the readers that it does not want the reform of the Muslim personal law, but the withdrawal of state’s control over Hindu law.¹¹ Such a declaration, which in this case may be taken to be identical with the position of the RRP party, was issued long after the BJS had decided to press for a uniform code.

The attitude towards the Constitution and the way it treated the matters of faith is also telling. Even as early as in 1950s, when the BJS and RSS opposed the Hindu civil

¹⁰ R. Venkataram, “Uniform Civil Code: Nothing Religious about It”, *Organiser*, 11 July 2016, at <<http://organiser.org//Encyc/2016/7/11/Uniform-Civil-Code---Nothing-Religious-About-it.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4>>, 5 March 2017.

¹¹ “Editorial”, *Sanmārg*, 14 April 1970, p. 4.

code reforms, they did not publicly speak against the Republic of India Constitution as such, nor did they entirely challenge the idea of “secularism” as enshrined in the Constitution (the Constitution was introduced in 1950 and India had not yet been described as a “secular” state at that time in the preamble, but the spirit of the act was markedly secular and secularism was a much debated idea). The BJS and RSS circles instead chose to reinterpret secularism and to point out that secularism did not entitle the state to interfere with religious customs. At the same time, however, as seen in quotes from R. Venkataraman’s article above, the BJS/BJP and RSS later used (and still use) the ideas of Constitution, including the notion of secularism to press for equal legal conditions of all Indian religious communities. The RRP, in comparison, had at first opposed India’s Constitution and the idea of secularism altogether. In its 1951 manifesto, the party claimed that the Constitution must be replaced and the new Constitution, as projected by the party (and never realized) was to give “full freedom to practice and preach religion in a proper manner”, provide for “a State Department of Religious Affairs to administer justice which shall be based on the recognized religious books, and in consultation with the religious heads with full impartiality, and keeping in view the interests of the Nation and the Society”. Hence, under that new Constitution the people would be “ruled by Dharma” and the government would be “based on religious doctrines”.¹²

Thus, with regard to the reform of the Hindu civil code (and the idea of the uniform civil code), to use Dasgupta’s notions again, the BJS/BJP and RSS had first stressed the “importance attached to sacred in maintaining life” but later agreed for it to be partially circumscribed by legal, secular conditions and thus agreed to a degree of “state-sponsored cultural engineering”. They moved on from defending the Hindu community alone to speak about the equal laws of the entire Indian nation, thus speaking against the belief that “the authority of the state must be circumscribed by the will of society” and hence their “preference of community wisdom over individual choice” officially and nominally moved from the preference of the Hindu community to that of the Indian nation.

The issue of accepting Dalits; the attitude towards the caste system

Though the three parties of the Hindu Right (BJS, RSS and HM) found themselves on the same page in the 1950s and 1960s with regards to the integration of Jammu and Kashmir with the Union of India and the cow protection movement, their attempt at uniting in one party proved futile. This movement was a perfect example of how Hindu conservatives and nationalist could work together under one banner. It was also a point to strengthen Dasgupta’s argumentation, as the RSS/BJS supported the idea of the complete ban on cow slaughter at that time and the RSS/BJP still supports it now.¹³ The movement certainly involved the aspect of “the importance attached to the

¹² D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State...*, pp. 464-465.

¹³ Cow slaughter is a directive principle of the Indian Constitution and it is banned in several states. The BJP 2014 election manifesto spoke of introducing the “necessary legal framework” to protect the cow

sacred in maintaining life” and was also projected as an aspect in the “embodiment of the national identity” (as the defenders of cow stated it was the nation’s will to protect the animal). On the other hand, one could point out that a demand that animal slaughter should be centrally regulated was a “state-sponsored cultural engineering” in itself. At any rate, while the idea of cow protection was shared by many (if not most) Hindu organizations, the issue of the caste system and the Dalits proved to a divisive one, and a one that should be considered with regard to conservatism.

One of the reasons why the three parties of the Hindu Right could not eventually unite was that they could not agree on whether the Dalits (untouchables) should be allowed to enter these parties and whether they should be allowed to enter temples.¹⁴ Swami Karpatri and the RRP were against allowing the Dalits to enter Hindu temples; the RRP also reportedly claimed that it would not become a part of a united party of the Hindu Right if the Dalits would be allowed to hold its membership. *We cannot become a party that shares bread and daughters (roti-beti) with the Harijans, like the BJS does* – wrote Karpatri in 1962.¹⁵ The other parties, however, were ready to accept the Dalits and did so, even if the members of this community had a small representation within the parties of the Hindu Right (and they still do). The RSS also accepts Dalit members and even though the organization had been long dominated by Brahmins, its central traditions, such as dining together of all members, are against the orthodox Hindu rules¹⁶ and indeed it thus had reportedly “unnerved” some of the Brahmin members of the RSS in the past.¹⁷ The BJP of today is very consciously trying to prove that it is open to Dalits, and to symbolically prove that it supports their social uplift. Dasgupta himself points out that the Ramjanmabhoomi movement of the RSS-BJP (which lead to the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992 in order to “rebuild” the

(Cf. Bharatiya Janata Party, *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat. Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas. Election Manifesto 2014*, New Delhi 2014, p. 41). While after gaining power the party had not introduced a central law to completely ban cow slaughter, it did call and campaign to introduce this ban in at least some of the states, though the party also reiterated it was for the state government to decide on this issue. The RSS’ standpoint on the cow slaughter issue is more rigid and the organization would prefer a complete and central ban. Cf., for instance, N. Das, “Opinion: Bring an End to Cow Slaughter”, *The Organiser*, 14 September 2015, at <<http://organiser.org/Encyc/2015/9/14/Opinion-Bring-an-End-to-Cow-Slaughter.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=>>, 21 November 2017.

¹⁴ D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State...*, p. 464, and P. Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text. Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*, Berkeley 1991, pp. 384-385.

¹⁵ Karpātrijī mahārāj, “Ye rājñītik dal”, *Sanmārg*, 23 February 1962, p. 4.

¹⁶ Cf., for instance, the memories of R.L. Dhooria, one of the RSS’ former members: “While iron discipline prevailed, the atmosphere of sociality and camaraderie that prevailed there was truly remarkable. There was no question of high and low. The question of caste, for instance, was simply conspicuous by its absence. We all played together, sang together, ate together. There were some, though not many, what are called low caste-boys but nobody ever thought of such footling nonsense. We were all Hindus and the children of the Bharat Mata”. R.L. Dhooria, *I Was a Swayamsevak (An Inside View of the RSS)*, New Delhi n.d., pp. 39-40.

¹⁷ Ch. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s. Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with Special Reference to Central India)*, New Delhi 1999, p. 45.

temple of god Rama) was symbolically spearheaded by lower castes, in order to show the party's attitude towards these communities.¹⁸ In stark contrast to what Karpatri had written, some politicians of the BJP, including the current party president Amit Shah, had publicly dined with the Dalits to show their disregard for the orthodox Hindu rules. It was the RRP, therefore, that more consistently called for protecting the orthodox Hindu traditions.

The HM and BJS/BJP in turn, used some of these traditions as crucial elements for the construction of the Hindu nation but were also ready to sacrifice some of them for the sake of national identity. Savarkar, who had greatly influenced the RSS and the BJP and had led the Hindu Mahasabha, had an uneasy relation with the caste system. On the one hand he claimed that all the Hindus shared the same blood and that inter-caste marriages "where the order of the day" in ancient India but at the same seemed to partially defend the caste system by claiming that its role was limited to regulate the flow of the noble Hindu blood.¹⁹ If all Hindus shared the same blood, one may ask, then what did the caste system actually regulate? It would seem Savarkar was at pains not to offend the orthodox Hindus on the one hand, and strived to achieve the unity of the Hindu nation on the other. Apart from this, however, it is known that Savarkar's campaign aimed for Dalit's uplift and broke orthodox tabus in the process, for which he was attacked by the conservative Hindus.²⁰ The BJS and HM were both in some ways linked to and inspired by the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist body that had been often criticized by Hindu orthodox bodies (including by swami Karpatri).²¹ Indeed, Savarkar stressed that Hinduism should not be identified with the "Sanatani sect" (the orthodox Hindu organization) though at the same time the Sanatani traditions were, according to him, a part of Hinduism.²²

If some elements of the caste and the *varna* system were partially rejected by the HM, RSS, BJS and BJP, how does it compare to the definition of Hindu conservatism? If one considers the caste system and the tradition of Dalit seclusion as an element of faith, and if one is to follow the idea that the defense of religious traditions is an element of conservatism, then the HM, RSS, BJS and BJP were not conservative by this account. Yet, it is also possible to point out that as there are many traditions and schools of thought within the Hindu religion and thus if we would consider these traditions that speak against caste and untouchable seclusion as parts of Hinduism, then there would be no conflict here.

¹⁸ S. Dasgupta, "Indian Conservatism and the Compulsions of Political Power", King's College London Youtube Channel, 16 December 2015, at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnVKXvDEKP4>>, 23 June 2016.

¹⁹ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva. Who Is a Hindu?*, New Delhi 2006, pp. 86-88. Karpatri, in turn, did not consider this co-mingling of blood as possible. Cf. Karpatrijī mahārāj, *Mārksvād aur Rāmrajy...*, p. 741

²⁰ D. Kheer, *Veer Savarkar*, Bombay 1966, pp. 494-495; L. McKean, *Divine Enterprise. Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Chicago 1996, p. 86.

²¹ K. Jones, *Arya Dharm. Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Punjab*, New Delhi 2006, pp. 27-42, 109-112.

²² V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva...*, p. 121.

It also difficult to conclude that “the preference of community wisdom over individual choice” is visible here; if any, it would be rather “the preference of the nation’s choice over community’s choice”. It would be true to say that the attempts to weaken the caste divides and untouchability were a process through which these parties wanted to project themselves as “an embodiment of the national identity.” Yet, in this case the national identity was more at odds with the orthodox social order than in agreement with it. Thus, it would be more precise to say that with regard to the caste system and the position of Dalits, these Hindu political organizations tried to find a proper balance between conservatism and nationalism.

The issue of monarchy abolition

Perhaps one may concede that one element that never became a genuine element of India’s 20th century political conservatism was the defense of the monarchy. In Europe this idea was an important part of post-French Revolution conservatism while it was not possible to include it in American conservatism for obvious reasons.

When the Indian monarchs, who were called “princes” by the British, mostly decided to join their dominions to the nascent independent state of India in 1947, they were promised a degree of autonomy and power within the new political framework. Yet, throughout 1950s and 1960s their autonomy, their power and their privileges were done away in several stages by the socialist governments of the Indian National Congress. Despite the fact that the majority of the rulers were Hindus by religion, the entire Indian Right – BJS, HM, RRP and Swatantra Party – did not put forward a demand for a complete retaining of the monarchy, while its components did in various degrees call for the retention of the rulers’ privileges. Yet again, the official proclamations of BJS and HM were less protective of the rulers than those of the RRP and Swatantra Party.

For instance, Bhagavan’s study of HM’s attitude towards Hindu monarchies shows that the party favored reforms in those principalities for the greater good of the Hindu populace²³, even though some of the Hindu monarchs supported the party.²⁴ HM’s leader, V.D. Savarkar, considered the Hindu princes (and the Hindu kingdom of Nepal) an important power to support the Hindu cause against the Muslims, but that power was also only a means to an end of a “consolidated Hindu Nation.”²⁵ Thus, while swami Karpatri of the RRP pointed out to how important the king’s role was in protecting the Hindu customs, Savarkar treated the Hindu monarchs in an instrumental way. Even though RRP’s members often betrayed their nostalgia after the Hindu monarchy, they officially stood for democracy. The *Sanmārg* newspaper was also visibly

²³ M. Bhagavan, “Princely States and the Hindu Imaginary: Exploring the Cartography of Hindu Nationalism in Colonial India”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2008), passim.

²⁴ The party was in certain periods supported by the rulers of Indore, Gwalior, Baroda, Patiala and Bikaner, among others. Cf. I. Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917-1947*, Cambridge 1997, p. 206 and J. McGuire, I. Copland (eds.), *Hindu Nationalism and Governance*, New Delhi 2007, pp. 267, 271.

²⁵ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindu Rashtra Darshan*, Poona n.d., p. 73.

reducing its focus on the importance of the monarchy in the course of the following years. In 1957, when comparing democracy to the ancient ideal of the monarchy, it found the former to be responsible for corruption and claimed that in ancient times the rulers retained full power, yet listened to the wise counsel of the ministers.²⁶ In 1962, its editorial admitted that although democracy may lead to political divisions, it is still important. The journal also continuously called for the upkeep of democratic ideals of the Indian republics and in 1970 eventually even accepted the taking away of the privy purses from the rulers but suggested that the state should now become a patron of Sanskrit publications and religious festivals such as Krishna-Lila, which some rulers had so far supported.

It may be simply argued that in post-independence India a genuine demand for a full retention of monarchies would inevitably obstruct the process of building a politically united state (while in Europe the authority of a single monarchy would often cover the entire state). Thus, while defending the legion of maharajas, the conservatives would find themselves in-between two ideas: religion and national identity. Religion would call for the protection of the monarchy, as religious traditions sanctified the ruler's authority and were, in turn, defended by the ruler. National identity called for a political unification of the country.

In this case I agree with Dasgupta. Indian conservatism may not be the “embodiment of national identity” but it certainly seeks to accommodate this ideal in the post-independence period. I stress the chronological aspect, as before 1947 it was possible for conservatives to retain their loyalty towards the British rule (or a particular Indian ruler). With the advent of one state, not only monarchy had to be abandoned but democracy had to be accepted. Indian political conservatism accepted the general idea of the Indian nation. In this, of course, it followed the political mainstream. This is why in 1953 the RRP could take part in the agitation to fully administratively merge Jammu and Kashmir with India aside HM and BJS²⁷, despite the fact that this would mean the opposition to the return of the Dogra monarchy (which was impossible anyway).

Thus, while the current BJP makes hardly any references to how Hindu monarchies had been dissolved in the 1950s and 1960s, in this case the other parties of the Hindu Right did not defend the rulers as well. It is equally true that the BJP predecessor, the BJS, had been supported by some of the Hindu rulers in the 1960s and 1970s²⁸, but arguably these monarchs chose to do so not in the vain hope of recreating their dominions but to adjust to the democratic system and find power in them. It may be true, as some argue, that the BJP often fares better in the states that had been created from a large proportion of former princely state territories (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh) and territories provided the BJP and RSS with an important number of cadres. It had been argued that this process “developed naturally and seamlessly out of the culture of Hindu majoritarianism which flourished at,

²⁶ “Editorial”, *Sanmārg*, 7 May 1957, p. 4.

²⁷ M. Weiner, *Party Politics in India...*, pp. 118-119.

²⁸ J. McGuire, I. Copland (eds.), *Hindu Nationalism and Governance...*, p. 277.

and around, the Hindu princely courts” (which had earlier functioned in these areas).²⁹ Even so, however, this did not lead the BJP to attempt at any form of recreation or defense of the Hindu monarchy. However, it is also obviously true that it was simply impossible to achieve this.

Yet, even the king of Nepal, until recently the last Hindu monarch of the world in its full right, was not defended by the BJP when after the end of the Maoist uprising he was forced to step down. It seems that the BJP, just like the rest of the Indian political establishment, instead decided to support the process of preparing the new Constitution of Nepal which would ultimately lead to Nepal becoming a republic and a federation, and would prove the final undoing of the world's last Hindu kingdom. During the process of preparing the constitution, RSS' *Organiser* even carried a piece by Acharya Norbu Sherpa, the general secretary of the Nepal Buddhist Federation, which stated that it was better for Nepal to choose secularism rather than “sticking to the outdated philosophy of theocratic Brahmanism dominance in the name of Hinduism.”³⁰ The former editor of the *Organiser*, however, while not defending the monarchy criticized the rejection of the “proposal to declare Nepal a “Hindu State” ” during the Constituent Assembly proceedings.³¹ Once again, the Hindu nation turned out to be more important for the RSS than a Hindu monarchy.

CHARACTER AND SELF-CONTROL

The aspect of perceiving one's political ideology as the “embodiment of national culture” does not, in my view, need elaboration as a separate section of the text, as all the concerned parties claimed that their respective ideologies embodied the national culture. It is, therefore, an important factor here, but not a one that will serve the purpose of telling the differences between the parties. This also the case of the “the importance of character and self-control”.

As for the latter, Dasgupta is right that “character building” is crucial for the RSS project. Yet, the RSS is an organization behind the BJS and BJP, not the party itself, so the choice of this element makes it difficult to establish which other parties in India may be regarded as conservative. It is not impossible for “character and self-control” to be very important for a number of leading individuals in other parties and to organizations linked to these parties. Such conclusions are difficult to arrive at through research. At any rate, these ideas also figure in the old issues of *Sanmārg*.³² They were also cru-

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 278-279.

³⁰ N. Sherpa, “Politics in Nepal: Why Is Secular Nepal a Better Idea?”, *Organiser*, 15 November 2014, at <<http://organiser.org//Encyc/2014/11/15/Politics-In-Nepal-Why-is-Secular-Nepal-A-Better-Idea.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=>>>, 21 November 2017.

³¹ S. Chari, “Nepal: Another Tryst with Constitution”, *Organiser*, 29 September 2015, at <<http://organiser.org//Encyc/2015/9/28/Nepal--Another-Tryst-with-Constitution.aspx?NB=&lang=3&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=>>>, 21 November 2017.

³² Cf. e.g., “Editorial”, *Sanmārg*, 24 June 1957, p. 4.

cial for Gandhi who, in many ways, can be regarded a much more genuine conservative Hindu than the followers of Hindutva (but that is a separate subject); and indeed Dasgupta himself points out that some of the aspects of Gandhi's thought were appealing to conservatives. Dasgupta points out to such aspects as Gandhi's imagery of *rām rājya*, the deification of village life, the attachment to traditional medicine or resistance against modern technology³³. More such aspects are at hand. After all, it was Gandhi who spearheaded the inclusion of the ban on cow slaughter in the Constitution's Directive Principles. Faith was crucial for him, and it was a part of the national identity, but in plural: the national identity incorporated many faiths, yet it remained important to Gandhi not to interfere in these religions, that is not to practice cultural engineering. On the other hand, while Gandhi, like the Hindu nationalists, did not strive for the dissolution of the caste system as such, he insisted that untouchability was its corruption that had to be cleansed. In another words, Gandhi may not appear as conservative in comparison to the anti-Dalit Karpatri, but he surely seemed much more conservative when compared to Jawaharlal Nehru. Thus, the notion of "character and self-control" itself seems to be too vague and often encountered to be a defining factor.

CONCLUSIONS: THE INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITIES

I would like to start here with Gellner's conclusion that the nationalists are concerned primarily with the continuity of communities while the conservatives are concerned primarily with the continuity of the institutions.³⁴ The notion of institution, I believe, is what is missing in Dasgupta's list, while it is available in some classical definitions of conservatism, such as that of Huntington.³⁵ The RRP wanted mainly to defend the institutions while the Hindu nationalists wanted to build a grand community, the nation, using these institutions, though often remolding or reinterpreting them in the process. When the BJS and HM were engaged with campaigns such as that of cow protection, which involved protecting a tradition without interfering in it, there was a scope of cooperation and with the RRP and its leader, Karpatri, was invited by the Hindu nationalists to the forefront of the movement. At other times, however, the BJS and HM were rather engaged in "cultural engineering" than opposing it, as the process of nation-building is essentially homogenizing.³⁶ When this process of nationalist homogenizing uses widely accepted religious symbols (such as the cow during the cow protection

³³ S. Dasgupta, "Indian Conservatism as Protest Movement", King's College London Youtube Channel, 16 December 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UdREQdvgyY>>, 23 June 2016. Similarly, Karpatriji was against the introduction of machines in India but only those of bigger size. Cf. Karpatriji mahārāj, *Mārksvād aur Rāmrājy...*, p. 462.

³⁴ E. Gellner, *Narody i nacjonalizm*, transl. by T. Holówka, Warszawa 1991, p. 160.

³⁵ S.P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1957), p. 455.

³⁶ P. Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance", in R. Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*, New Delhi 2014, p. 346.

movements) the Hindu nationalists could cooperate with Hindu conservatives. However, when the same process homogenizes different traditional religious institutions (as it happened with the caste system, the Dalits, and the Hindu civil code), the Hindu nationalists will be opposed by Hindu conservatives. Thus, in my opinion the BJP is not conservative, because this party (and the RSS) seeks primarily to unify and homogenize the Hindus, not to protect their institutions. The unification, however, happens mostly through the mobilization based on community sentiments and through evoking religious traditions and institutions, and hence many elements of BJP's nationalism are conservative and share many aspects of faith with the Hindu conservatives.

The problem with faith is that the political correctness of the Indian political scene leads to all parties claiming to be "secular"³⁷, even when at close hand religious elements of their agenda are clearly visible. Certain terms, such as "culture", may be used as a façade of these elements. Yet, once we pass through that façade, it becomes manifest that a party like the BJP does include religion-linked elements in its agenda and it certainly differs here from a number of parties. Was the Indian National Congress leadership temporarily conservative when it played the "soft Hindutva card" in the 1980s? Wouldn't it be more precise to conclude that it decided to temporarily tap a religious issue for political reasons? And was Jinnah and his Muslim League conservative because of the importance of Islam-related themes in its agenda?

The issue of the Muslim League is actually symmetrical to that of Hindu nationalists. Jinnah kept away from the Khilafat movement precisely because it involved the orthodox Muslim clergy. At that time, the Muslim conservative element had a Gandhi-brokered political alliance with the Congress, not the Muslim League.³⁸ This was despite the fact that the issue of faith should have seemingly united the Muslim League and the Muslim orthodoxy. Once again, Jinnah's aim was to build a community (a sovereign Indian Muslim nation), while the clergy wanted primarily to defend the Islamic institutions, and indeed a number of Muslim conservatives did oppose the idea of Pakistan. A similar point can be made regarding the relations between Sikh orthodoxy and the Akalis.³⁹

The difference between preaching and practicing is yet another difficulty in asserting who is a conservative. As long as we consider official ideologies, hardly any Indian party may be found to be conservative. Pondering on this issue, H. Erdman made a list of possible explanations including two conflicting ones: conservatism either had to come to terms with the modernizing world or the challenges of these change have not actually put the "vested interest" in danger, for which reason there was no reason for a genuinely conservative party.⁴⁰ The landowners, the Brahmins, and more generally speaking the upper castes have dominated many political structures and whatever ideology these bodies have used, they more or less clandestinely acted as agents of old order's conservation. The right wing of the Congress would be a good example of this

³⁷ R. Bhargava, "What is Secularism For?", in idem (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics...*, p. 493.

³⁸ P. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, Cambridge 2006, p. 231.

³⁹ B. Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947*, New Delhi 2000, pp. 230-231.

⁴⁰ H. Erdman, "Conservatism in India...", pp. 793-795.

strategy. It is certainly much easier to conclude who was not a conservative – such as Nehru or Periyar – than who was one.

It is certainly true that in many cases, such as that of the caste system, one finds Indian politics to be much more conservative than their official, political correct level might suggest. On the other hand, it was Erdman that offered perhaps the most important work on Indian conservatism: his study on the Swatantra party. It reminds us that the vested interest did indeed feel endangered at times. The Swatantra Party was a response exactly to many such dangers: the gradual disappearance of princes' political powers and privileges, the limitations put on landowners, the socialist policies of the state regarding the private sector. In regard to these issues, political conservatism in India was an empirical reality. Yet again, the definition of conservatism in these circumstances would rest rather not on Dasgupta's points but on Huntington's "situational" definition. In it, political conservatism is an "ideology arising out of a distinct but recurring type of historical situation in which a fundamental challenge is directed at established institutions and in which the supporters of those institutions employ the conservative ideology in their defense."⁴¹ This definition, in my view, agrees with Gellner's aforementioned view and can therefore be put in a simpler way: since the 1950s, the "vested interest" in India was partially defending the institutions of the old system and was conservative by this account.

From this perspective, both the Swatantra Party and the RRP were far more conservative than the HM or BJS. The RRP also sought to incorporate the princely and landowning elements but was seemingly much less successful in this strategy compared to Swatantra. However, the conclusion was Erdman's careful study was that even Swatantra was not conservative in every respect.⁴² For instance, while some expect the element faith to be a part of conservatism⁴³, the Swatantra Party brought together both traditional people as well as those who strived to defend the elements of *status quo* rather opportunistically, that is without believing in their exceptional values or religious sanction. Rajagopalachari, for instance, had no special esteem for either the traditional village system or the institution of the monarchy.⁴⁴

Arguably, however, every party, including the most radical one, had to accept the changing times at least to some degree. Thus, while most of the Hindu Right never came to terms with issues such as cow slaughter, it did rather easily bid farewell to the institution of the Hindu monarchy. While the definition of political ideologies, such as nationalism and conservatism, should be useful in categorizing each party, such a definition should not unrealistically expect the party to radically follow this ideology in every aspect. Judging by the aspects mentioned in this article, if one would attempt at visualizing a conservative-nationalist spectrum of the four parties of the Right since

⁴¹ S.P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology...", p. 455.

⁴² H. Erdman, *The Swatantra Party...*, pp. 6-9.

⁴³ Cf. e.g. R. Kirk, *The Conservative Mind. From Burke to Santayana*, Chicago 1953, pp. 7-8, and S.P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology...", p. 455.

⁴⁴ H. Erdman, *The Swatantra Party...*, pp. 9-10.

1950, then in my view the Hindu Mahasabha was the most radically nationalist (and the most modernist), followed by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (also more nationalist and modernist than conservative), while the Swatantra Party was more conservative than nationalist, followed by the most conservative and least nationalist (and least modernist) Ramrajya Parishad. Comparing the parties of the contemporary times to that period is, of course, less justified, as time has brought many changes, but if one would try to put the Bharatiya Janata Party on the same scale, then it would certainly turn out to be more nationalist than conservative, more liberal and modernist than the Hindu Mahasabha was, and certainly less conservative than any of those four parties.

To conclude, I find it inspiring that Dasgupta has taken up the issue of Indian political conservatism and I largely agree with the aspects he pointed to. The problem, however, is that his list is not exhaustive enough to tell the difference between nationalism and conservatism. It is only when we include the element of the defense of “established institutions” of the old “social order”, to use Huntington’s words, together with the hierarchy and ownership structure of that social order, and with Gellner’s institutions-communities dichotomy, that the crucial differences begin to appear. If this perspective is accepted, the religiously nationalist parties, such as: the HM, BJS, BJP or the Muslim League, will not be defined as genuinely conservative. It is the parties like the Swatantra Party – and even more the Ramrajya Parishad – that historically fulfilled these requirements.

This, however, means that as long as only official statements are concerned, it may be futile to look for a fully Hindu conservative party in today’s India. It certainly may not mean that the Hindu conservatives have suddenly disappeared but that they are less visible as all the political bodies learned to claim to follow the ideas of secularism, democracy, equality, etc. While Karpatri and the old Hindu conservatives were outspoken in their defense of *hindu dharm*, even they spoke of equality (although RRP’s leader would always sooner or later contradict himself on this issue and prove his preference for the old, hierarchical order). For various reasons, however, the RRP and HM are now virtually defunct, and Swatantra Party is no more. For those Hindu conservatives that realistically accept the political scene as it is this now, the BJP may therefore be the best viable choice, even if far from perfect one. This is perhaps the situation of many conservatives across the world: there may be no truly conservative parties to vote for in their respective countries, but there often may be some parties of the Right that include certain conservative points within their agenda.

From this perspective, I understand Dasgupta’s approach. Rather than undertaking to put the benchmark of historical conservatism so high that no party seems to reach it, he preferred to realistically assess the present political situation and therefore sought to establish the decisively conservative elements of BJP’s agenda and ideology.

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Krzysztof IWANEK – is the Head of the Asia Research Centre at the War Studies University. In his academic work, he focuses on Indian history and politics, especially Hindu nationalism and Hindu conservatism. He is a regular contributor to The Diplomat magazine, and an occasional contributor to a number of other publications, such as The Interpreter (by Lowy Institute) or Obserwator Finansowy. He graduated from History (M.A.), Indology (M.A.) and Cultural Studies (PhD), all from the University of Warsaw. In the past he has taught at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Warsaw University and Collegium Civitas. He has co-authored a history of modern India (*Indie. Od kolonii do mocarstwa. 1857-1947*) with Adam Burakowski. His forthcoming book will cover Vidya Bharati: a chain of of private schools run by Hindu nationalists in India.