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‘9/11’: HINDU AND ASIAN RESPONSES IN OCEANIA

Purushottama Bilimoria

We have heard a great deal about the reaction of Jewish people and Christians (particularly in America) to the catastrophic events of ‘9/11’ in New York, when the twin towers of the WTC came tumbling down. But we have not heard much, if at all, of the response of Hindus in India and in the diaspora at large to these events. In this paper I take a slightly different route: I come to it from a more distant region, with which I am familiar, namely, from the quarter of Hindus settled in Australia, whose close links with the global diasporic Hindu network places them on the larger map as well. This connection is of particular interest here. The paper develops, via a narrative, a critical perspective on how a majoritarian religion from its own national situation (and cross-border tensions) responds to the events of September 11 and aligned fall-outs, to extend its wariness about a minority religious presence (though fearsomely more than a small ‘minority’ in Indonesia) across the globe. This case study might be exemplary for a study of immigrant South Asian religious communities in other regions, such as Europe, as well.

I

In Melbourne, on the morning of the September 12th, which would be early evening of the 11th in New York, I boarded a tram. On the seat across a lady was scanning a tabloid newspaper whose header read: “War on America” with images of some skyscrapers belloowing out smoke. A new Hollywood blockbuster movie, I thought to myself, like ‘Airport’, or ‘Armageddon’. I did not pay any attention to it. My mobile phone rang and it was my wife telling me in a soft voice that my sister-in-law from the other side of town and her cousins from California were frantically phoning through asking if we, one or both of us, were over in New York or Long Island, caught up in the terrible thing unfolding there. She proceeded to explain that the World Trade Center (WTC), possibly the Empire State Building and other big landmarks in New York, had been struck by ‘planes’ (I heard ‘warplanes’), and that her Hindu cousins said the attacks have been attributed to Muslim radicals. ‘They [media or intelligence] think it’s led by Osama bin Laden.’ Well, I said, in a self-reflective grumble, ‘Their concerns for me are not unfounded... for all your cousins know, I could be in New York, I was supposed to be there this Fall; but I

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have stayed back *because* you wanted me to spend more time in Melbourne while you recovered...*, whereupon the phone crackled for a moment before my other-half cut my self-pitying diatribe short. She impressed upon me the gravity of the situation, as if to say, it is not about *you* but about the *world*. It seemed like the Third World War had started.

Once at the University, the mood seemed somber, as my colleagues and other staff were huddled around small television sets that materialised in the corridor. Although the same spectacle was now replayed many times over; the horror and mystery deepened by the hour. From my office phone I tried to reach my close friends in New York. The phonelines were dead. It was not until 3 p.m in the afternoon "roughly 1 a.m in N.Y. " that I finally got through to anyone. But my friend (let us call her Sandria) in Brooklyn had one of the more touching stories to tell. It went thus.

Sandria's recently acquired Hindu mother and sister-in-law were visiting from Trinidad. They had planned to get a lift with Sandria on her way to work and then to go up to the viewing terrace of the WTC at about 8.30 that Tuesday morning, they would visit other popular sites in Manhattan later in the afternoon. But routine weekly rituals delayed the departure. At 9.00 am Sandria's husband called and suggested they switch on the television: the screen projected a second aeroplane flying into the south tower of the WTC, sending off yet another gigantic cloud of dust and debris flying in the direction of Sandria's office a few blocks away. Still thinking of getting to work, Sandria reached for the telephone thinking she should let her associates know that she would be arriving by subway in twenty minutes. The sister-in-law screamed, 'Look the tower has just collapsed'; whereupon they rushed up the fire-escape stairs, in time to witness the last gush of smoke and dust. It was as if a volcano had erupted before the skeletal steel frames of the first tower melted and caved into ground zero. *He-Raam (Oh God)!* cried her mother-in-law, *'Kaan badnashlog ye behkari kaam kiya?'* ("Who's done this terrible unpropitious deed?") as she bore her knuckles to her forehead. *'Evil-lok, amma',* quipped the sister-in-law in pigeon Hindi. *'Kiya apraad (What calamity)!* replied the mother. At least they themselves were safe, at this short distance, or perhaps saved by their devotional intent from being amidst the rubbles of the faulted towers.

The family folklore and similar stories that reached Trinidad and spread like wild lotus to the Hindu diasporic communities across the globe echoed a similar theme. It was that literally hundreds of devout Hindus, or Indians if one is particular about their secular identity, were saved by their gods or gurus, Shiv and Sai Baba, from their remote seats in the Himalayas, Nasik (near Pune) and Puttaparthi. The blessed souls were saved from being in New York, or from even being close to the disaster area. Except for a few unlucky ones of course, such as the newly married nephew-in-law of Vasudha Narayan, (the then President of the American Academy of Religion). Vasudha's last words of love for those he was leaving behind were spoken into a cell-phone from one of the tower floors. But there has been no headcount of exactly how many Hindus or Indians were unwittingly victims of the twin-towers’ crash, or how many had been on board the four fatal airline flights.
Save for some names that I recognized from the roll call of the departed, scrolled through on the anniversary of the WTC-Pentagon-Pennsylvania crashes.

In addition to her grief for her extended family’s loss, Professor Narayan was publicly upset at what she saw as the American response, which she equated more or less to race-religious stereotyping. Further, she was upset at the absence of sensitivity on the part of the city officials to permit significant space for the performance of Hindu last rites for those, like her husband’s nephew, who had vanished in the unsanctified crypt of what is pitifully called ‘Ground Zero’.3 Far from feeling patriotic, Vasudha Narayan’s sentiment was imbued with doubts about ‘what on earth we Indians were doing in America when we had some choice as to where we could be?’ This quiddity was echoed in some ways in the wry reflections of Brian Gilmore, a black attorney and poet, who noted a sharp change in black American patriotism since the days of strong allegiance once pledged by Richard Wright (the self-exiled African American Marxist writer) in support of ‘the solid national front to wage war until victory is won.’4 Gilmore was concerned about Jim Crow syndrome returning in another guise, in the mainstream American psyche. It is worth quoting Gilmore: ‘On the radio in the days after the [9/11] bombing, I heard many black Americans state [that] they felt bad for the victims, they felt that America had to do something; but then some would add at the end of their comments statements about not feeling that deep sense of patriotism that most Americans feel....They were Americans, but not quite white Americans. They cried for the victims but not necessarily for America.’

There were other victims too of the sudden surge in patriotism: in the aftermath of the war waged against the Taliban in Afghanistan, 200 Sikhs in the U.S., and a handful in other Western countries, were assaulted in public places. One Sikh man died in the rampage. Their only crime was that they sported a turban, hence making them indistinguishable, for undiscerning eyes, from the Talibans and apparently from Al Qaeda-Arabs too.

Continuing the theme of diasporic people’s folk sentiments, there are echoes of these with certain variations within the Hindu community in India. The latter in turn connects in an interesting way to the global Hindu response to 9/11, and particularly to what I encountered in Australia. I wish to explore that theme further.

The consensual rumour4 has it that the Mahagurus, the benign Avatars given to prophetic distance-sights (doorpe-darshan), had some premonition of an event of gigantic proportion about to occur in a prominent location in some part of the globe. The rumour says that warnings had thus been issued to foreign devotees to cut down on travelling all the way across the globe to India. The instability of the world political order was also apparently foretold. But I was told that the Aboriginal people in Australia were also aware of some major catastrophe happening somewhere, though no further details were forthcoming. The difference with the Indian fore-telling is that it came with a judgment, namely: ‘Man has allowed
himself to be overtaken by greed, desire, anger and hatred... man has lost the
spiritual gift of embodied life that even the gods hanker after."

While scouring around India for possible Hindu guru responses, I was told by
a white-clad devotee in a village where I was doing fieldwork regarding the
relationship, traditionally said to be harmonious, between caste Hindus and Muslims
that, ‘Swami [Sai Baba] has said that what these people [the Muslims] are doing is
not barabar (right).’ He went on to explain that the Baba is not happy with the
violence and destructive methods the Muslims take recourse too. There was no
confirmation of this reportage through any other sources. It did not take me long to
discern that this was a Bal Thackeray stooge, planting seeds of discord and
propagating suspicion and outright distrust of Muslims, especially those living in
India and Pakistan, and the territories in between.

The iconoclastic Bal Thackeray, also known as Balasaheb and Dada or the
underworld ‘Sheriff of Mumbai’, leads the Shiv Sena, a nativist Hindu right-wing
party, that is inextricably linked with the Sangh Parivar (family of Hindu chauvinist
organizations) that supported the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when they came to
power in India in the 1980s and 1990s. The Sangh Parivar was implicated allegedly
in the razing of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya; and the Shiv Sena, in the riots and
carnage that engulfed Mumbai the very next day (6 December 1992). Shiv Sena
condemns terrorism and in the period following 9/11 organized Hindu mega-rituals
(maha-arti-s) of peace offerings, aimed to rouse the Muslim neighbourhoods,
surreptitiously insinuating their allegiance to Pakistan. Nevertheless, Bal Thackeray
had some 80 volunteer potential ‘suicide bombers’ on stand-by for an onslaught
into Pakistan in the event of the impending war against the global ‘enemy’ that
was perched as much across India’s north-western corridor as in Central Asia,
with which the West seemed presently more concerned.

But the geopolitics of the region transformed overnight as the U.S. felt
compelled to court the cooperation of Pakistan’s military dictator, General
Musharraf, in the war against the Taliban regime that provided the Al Qaeda its
support base in Afghanistan. This derivative alliance was forged despite the fact
that Pakistan had nurtured and provided a haven for Taliban mercenaries in
madrasas (training camps for the talibs, students) along its borders. Pakistan was
pampered and re-armed by the U.S.—a move that drew vehement criticism from
the BJP power-house in New Delhi. This ‘about-turn’ further incensed Hindus in
India and across the world (a discussion I shall return to). As I attended a civic
event at Melbourne’s Town Hall organized to observe the first anniversary of the
tragedy of 9/11, I discovered that Australian Hindus were among them.

What was striking about this particular civic gathering was that it involved
representatives of the major ‘faith-traditions’, including the Hindu religion, as well
as academics and a prominent Aboriginal Australian public figure. The latter
dignitary opened her speech by welcoming everyone to the land of the indigenous
people and expressing sympathies for the victims of 9/11 on behalf of her people. The Aboriginal people, she noted, had lived in harmonious relations with the settler community with full extended hospitality before the tribal region became a major settlement and eventually capital of the colony of Victoria. The indigenous communities had suffered violence and oppression, but they never retaliated with any kind of untoward violence or intolerance, and certainly not with the pointless horrendous terrorism that had been witnessed in the U.S., and by the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11. Instead, what the Aboriginal people have been asking for and struggling with is the process of Reconciliation. Their own nonviolent struggle has been recognized across the world, for example, in the General Assembly hearings in the United Nations, and recently with the visit of Martin Luther King Jr.’s son. King Jr III had called on the Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, to apologise to the Aboriginal people over the ‘stolen generation’ debacle, and other insufferable losses borne by the community under the erstwhile ‘White Australia’ policy. That is the Black Australian sentiment, and there are parallels with Black America, as King Jr III had indeed observed.

The same message of tolerance and nonviolence was reiterated by other speakers and representatives of the settler and immigrant communities alike. A plea was resounded for harmony and for religions to ‘go soft’ on their dealings with the world. The moral was that religions had become far too embroiled with politics and consequently, they had lost the role of generating harmony and unity among peoples. But the Chief Police Commissioner of the Victoria, the first woman to assume this role, reminded the audience that this was not the time to blame and victimise people of any religion, especially Arab-Muslims. She pointed to the state of New South Wales where a recent serial rape incident, attributed to teenagers of Lebanese Muslim extraction, had served to exacerbate the fear and backlash against the Muslim community in that state. Elsewhere in the country Mosques had been torched and Muslim youths, especially girls, who stood out in their head-covering hijab or burkha, had been harassed and humiliated on the streets and in school grounds. And there had been threats of rape directed towards Muslim school girls. Roshana, a Muslim university student raised in Australia and an advisor on youth affairs to the NSW government, confessed that she had never been scared of her own country before September 11, but that she was now.

Outraged by similar incidents, Abdullah Saeed, a Maldives-born Muslim scholar and expert on Islamic jurisprudence from Melbourne University, wrote an article for a prominent daily newspaper criticising the unreflective presuppositions that misapprehended, and paint savage images of Muslims in Australia. Drawing from his own study of the 1% of Muslims that constituted the population of some 20 million Australians, he noted with acrimony:

‘The events of Sept 11, gang rapes in Sydney, the Tampa crisis [a rescue boat found adrift in Indonesian waters], and the debate surrounding Middle Eastern asylum seekers have all
become associated with a view in Australia that Muslims as a group represent a threat to our [Australian] values and institutions... Muslims have been part of [the] Australian society since the 1860s. The first Australian mosque was opened in Adelaide in 1890.10

Elsewhere11, Saeed urged that the Islamic ideals of jihad (‘self-defense’) should be distanced from the new militant interpretation of ‘jihadism’, with its apparent legitimisation of terror against non-combatants, along with the blinkered tactics of suicide bombing and brutal violence, which are thoroughly un-Islamic. He argued that it is illogical to blame all Muslims for some acts of terror as it is to blame all Christians for the attacks on Catholics school children in Northern Ireland. Responses to certain oppressive conditions and struggle for territorial sovereignty could well erupt in violent encounters; he gave examples of Palestinians under Israel, Chenchens under the Russian regime, Kashmiri Muslims abetted by Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI), Kosovons oppressed by the Bosnian Serbs, and so on. But these for him constituted exceptions rather than the rule.12

II

The kind of analysis that we have seen Saeed suggesting, however, falls rather short of any deeper theoretical insight into the genesis of ‘jihadism’. For that we turn to scholars in New York. Faisal Devji, a historian of South Asian Islam at the New School University, has championed a compelling theory more recently. Devji points out that the jihadī worldview has a more complex history “going back at least to the radical politicisation of Islam in the works of the Pakistani intellectual Abul A’la Mawdudi and the Egyptian rebel, Sayyid Qutb, around the Cold War period. However, while this movement is an outcome more from the peripheries of the Islamic world than from its core region, Devji argues that the violent vision of the radical jihadīs is nevertheless better seen as an alternative ethical universalism rather than a strictly anti-Western tirade.13 In other words, the political geography that best describes the contours of the jihadīs is not one bound by the specifics of a national ideology or a religion, but rather one circumscribed by a moral response to their own internal angst: to whiten, anger of the numerically and amorphously small pitted against the majoritarian genuflections of an indiscriminate globalisation of power in the age of modernity.

The supplemental insight on ‘anger’ is argued more fully in the work of the South Asian social anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai (also with the New School).14 Arguably, the U.S. appears to be at the helm of this ‘vertebrate’ (“have-all”) system, driving as it does the unfettered forces of high-velocity capitalism, media control, open market economy, trade monopoly, long-distant credit, and multilateral sanctions. Under such conditions “of what Appadurai calls ‘the anxiety of incompleteness and uncertainty’—‘cellular’ identities (the “have nots”) that are fractured with economic disenfranchisement, national disintegration, and racial extinction, or ‘ethnic cleansing’, often turn predatory.15 They respond with terror,
which they justify on some alternative moral framework, but which blurs the boundaries of nation and space, war and peace, self-sacrifice and violence, emergency and everyday-life, humanism and torture. Add to this a fact Mahmood Mamdani, a Columbia University social scientist, has demonstrated: the CIA had a direct role back in the 1980s in forging a stronger link between Islam and the fledgling jihadi mentalité in Central Asia, thereby abetting a radical Islamist ideology of holy war with transnational ambitions and reach. Al Qaeda, and to an extent the Taliban and the Hezbollah (embroiled in a war with Israel in Lebanon with its support extending from Palestine to Iran), are cellular organisations whose loci is more global and politically diffused than it is regional and culturally visible.

Theory aside, with the popular sentiments promulgated by Saeed and articulated by other dignified delegates at the service, since 9/11, it was to be expected that Melburnians too would adjudge that all such stereotypical race-hate abuses based on identifiable religious profiles were both unsavoury and patently un-Australian. The European Jewish representative at the service, who had himself come to this country as a refugee, expressed disquiet with the Government’s policy of racially profiling asylum seekers from Middle Eastern regions. In drastic response, the Government had instigated a policy of mandatory detention, wherein sick women and children were among those detained, along with stricter processing regulations for obtaining refugee status, an act which severely disadvantaged this particular group.

The Hindu representative, who is a Sanskrit scholar serving as a Hindu celebrant, for his part was less specific on the details of the sentiments and responses appropriate to the occasion. He instead engaged in platitudes about Hinduism’s teaching that all paths lead to the same God and therefore there should be greater cooperation rather than enmity between religious groups. A secular-Hindu scholar of postcolonialism from UCLA raised his eyebrows, and at the reception that followed did not miss the opportunity to tackle the Hindu priest about his rather uncincisive remarks from the podium, with this question: ‘This [rhetoric about] one God in Hinduism... and yaar nothing about the violence unleashed by Hindus against Muslims as in Ahmedabad a few months back in the wake of the Godhra incident, and elsewhere going back to the 1992 razing of the Babri masjid? kiya Baba?’ As his hands measured out the gap of the communal cleavage, he continued, ‘Given half a chance Hindus will opportunistically use this moment and widespread mood against the Muslims to beat them up...’

The Hindu priest got him to pause and proceeded with a response that in actual intent he did not want to offend anyone (implying, it seems, the Hindus in the audience, or those listening to the sermons on the planned radio broadcast at a later occasion). He confessed that as an academic-scholar he had other impressions to share, which over lunch he would reveal with some painful facts about the dominant Hindu view in the community. ‘The majority of the Hindus [in Australia]
are middle-class professionals and most are fanatical, red-necks, holding on to the extreme view that all Muslims are fundamentalists.' Indeed, the narrative unfolded, most Hindus believe that all Muslims are potential terrorists (echoing a dictum from the Ahmedabad Hindu rioters that 'While all Muslims are not terrorists, all terrorists are Muslims'), and that they deserve the 'war on terrorism' that Mr George W. Bush and the Allies, notably Tony Blair and John Howard, have declared; Muslims in Pakistan, India and Palestine are no exceptions to this growing menace to the world and to the civilisations established much before the emergence of Islamic culture."

The view recounted here in no uncertain terms resonated with the growing Hindu Right's picture in India of the minority Muslims, portrayed as anti-national and anti-Hindu, playing host (or Trojan horse) to the militant, transnational Islamic movements, bent on destroying the harmonious fabric of the secular Indian civilisation. Muslims in India enjoy their own personal law (subset of national laws based on customary moral practices and scriptural norms governing family matters), which allows their men to be polygamous and their women to be oppressed and victimised. The Muslims, now racialised to represent 'the other' of the Hindus, have become a symbol of the failure of the Indian nation-state and its constitutional secularism.17

In our subsequent meetings, my well-connected informant agreed to elaborate on his observations, but particularly in the wake of the Bali bombing that had just occurred around the time of the third meeting. The Bali incident of course brought those same fears one step closer to the adopted home of the Hindus. They felt less safe now than when they had watched closely on their televisions the plethora of terrorist activities in the Middle East, in Jammu-Kashmir, in the U.S., or even in Godhra, Gujarat. Terrorism—echoing a careful chosen phrase by the Prime Minister of Australia—'was now at our doorsteps.' The Bali bombing which inflicted death and injury on a large number of innocent Australians, American and Balinese alike, accentuated the growing angst and resentment towards the identity known as 'Muslim' or 'Mussalman', or 'Miya', irredeemably, compounded with the media images of Arab-Muslim led terrorism, with Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, Osama bin Laden now at large. To that blackened list is added the name of Abu Bakar Bash‘yir of Jameeh Islamiyah, in Indonesia, who is said to be connected with Laksar Jihad, among other suspects and culprits.

According to my informant, the so-called Satsang Parivar (with double entendre on sat and sangh, truth and collective) in Melbourne has some strong links with the Sangh Parivar in India and the Hinduutva movement in the diaspora. The links seemed to have been fostered through a previous Maharashtran community celebrant who made regular visits to the Hindu communities in the U.S. and sent back a regular journal called 'Letter from America' for publication in an Australian Indian monthly. Satsang Parivar held a ceremony where its members prayed and sent out
condolences to the victims of the Bali bombing, while in the same tone deploping terrorism and urging that the blame not be put squarely on Muslims. But according to my informant, this public face of the Hindutva-inclined Satsang belies the privately coveted views of its patrons, who find themselves suddenly surrounded by immigrant Muslim communities and Muslim countries in the regions to the north. This has been their source of disillusionment also with Australian secular multiculturalism, believing that they had left the subcontinent with all its communal travails for some country such as Canada or Belgium; they might as well have moved to the Muslim-ghettos of Ahmedabad! They had not counted on the largest Muslim country breathing over their shoulders in their newly adopted home. They have been further worried by the global terrorist network of the Al Qaeda or aligned radical Islamist movements, propelled by Saudi petro-dollars and Wahabist ideology (that Enlightened Indian Muslims had rejected back in the 19th century).

They are also apprehensive of groups linked to Al Qaeda in the regions extending across the archipelago, to West Papua, Malaysia, the Philippines and possibly operative in Australia as well. Kashmir and Pakistan are very much realities here. Something else deeply worried them. Admitting that capitalism and western economic Islamism (either abetted by America initially during the Cold War, to check against the threat of communism spreading its tentacles in Central Asia or as a resentment and reaction to their own marginalised plight in the global equation) has much to be blamed for. Nevertheless there is a certain attitude among the Muslims, the neo-traditionalists or fundamentalists alike, that is difficult to bare. The Islamist ideology is that those who are not Muslims or do not convert are kefirs (heathens), doomed in the grand plan (telos) of the Almighty. ‘We have our own laws, personal laws, and we cannot live under them in Australia, why would we want to live under Shari‘at law if such becomes a reality under the aspired to pan-Islamic rule in the region (that is what Abu Bakar Bash’yir has been reported as saying18).’ Early on, the Indian daily papers had carried editorials on the Taliban requiring Hindus to wear a yellow piece of cloth on their shirts to distinguish them as Hindus. A Taliban official was reported as saying: ‘Hindus and Sikhs live freely here, but of course they have to abide by the laws of the land.’

My informant reported that he regularly found himself arguing with his Hindu friends that ‘you can’t just get rid of Muslims from the world or from India since they constitute 12% of the Indian population and that is a large number (almost as large as Indonesia’s Muslim population).’ He would also caution them with these arresting words: ‘If hostility is shown and harmonious relations are not set up, they will retaliate and each one can become a terrorist, as seems to be fated, given the way things are unfolding in Ahmedabad.’ Someone close to him confided that the way the Muslims are treated in Ahmedabad they will all turn into terrorists; the infamous Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi (also in the BJP camp), has insinuated this anxiety in defense of the state’s response to the Godhra event. Just
as Islamism is on the rise in the rest of the world as a reaction to Western capitalist hegemony and its globalisation and militarisation intentionalities, it is on the rise in India too, partly as a reaction to Hindu chauvinism and the government’s mismanagement of the situation. Often this occurs in complicity with the mostly Hindu police contingents supposedly sent to arrest the frequent communal riots and mayhem that break out in the urban centres.¹⁹

Of course, the judgments have been coloured by the events of 9/11, and it is difficult to assess how deeply anti-Islamic the Hindus might have been had 9/11 not happened; but it did happen and that is the reality in the new post-Westphalian world order. Amidst the pathos and anti-Muslim sentiments, there are ambivalences and sharp divisions also.

The Sri Lankan Hindus, who are less visible and have come from violence-torn regions themselves, are less judgmental about the claims of pan-Islamic terrorism and America’s assumed right to defend and import democratic civilisation all over the globe. But they lament that Hindus, divided along caste and regional lines, do not stand up in unison; nor do they make themselves part of the mainstream Australian political economy. This places Hindus at one remove from the dominant voices in the community, and from the lobby-groups, such as the churches and the liberal Jewish groups. The Sri Lanka (Tamil) Hindus in Australia profess to deplore violence of any kind—militant, communal, ethnic, religious. Although it is widely claimed that diasporic Tamil Hindus have a global network mechanism through which they provide massive funds and moral support to the Tamil Tigers back in the peninsula of Jaffna. Nevertheless, having witnessed such brutish carnage in their former homeland and from which they sought refuge elsewhere in the pacific waters of Oceania, they are of the firm belief that there is no justification in killing, whether as jus ad bellum or jus in bello. But the Bhagavad Gita, the Epics and the Dharmasastras, according to some Hindus, can be invoked to justify violence for a righteous cause.²⁰ Tamil Hindus feel themselves to be equally vulnerable in Australia, particularly if the nation becomes too enmeshed in a foreign war. Newspapers in India expressed concerns about American war plans, in Afghanistan and later in Iraq; and these came to be.

It should be noticed that there is a common denominator across the ambivalences expressed. Pakistan was once the centre for Taliban training camps and continues to arm and direct insurgents in Jammu-Kashmir if not in India as well, reminding one of the terrorist assault on the Indian Parliament (December 2001), the day-light shooting in the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore (December 2005), and the surprise all-out attack by Pakistani armed forces in Kargil, a security hill-base in the Kashmir Line of Control (LOC), in 1999. Very recently there were serial bomb-blasts on commuter trains in Mumbai that killed some 300 innocent people and injured another 700; the Indian intelligence have suspected the hand of ISI, although no conclusive evidence has been forthcoming.
from those arrested in connection with the blasts. Nevertheless, all Hindus, whether from the subcontinent or Sri Lanka, or South Africa, find it unfathomable that Pakistan could suddenly make an about-turn and side with the U.S. in the so-called ‘war against terror’. The U.S. ignored India’s strategic location and unrequited overtures when President Bush resolved to target Afghanistan shortly after 9/11. Choosing Pakistan instead, India’s nuclear-armed neighbour, has seen Pakistan inadvertently gain further strength and military hardware for its continuing resolve over weaning Indian-controlled Kashmir to its side. The U.S. had established new military bases in Pakistan in preparation for the war on Afghanistan, and the dictator President of Pakistan is often in the United States and at the United Nations promising further support to ‘smoke out the terrorists’; meanwhile Osama bin Laden remains alive in hiding, possibly in the impenetrable terrains between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan has by all accounts delivered less on this regional operation than it had promised. One report on asylum seekers seeking shelter in Australia suggested that Pakistan’s ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) agents had arrived in Australia masquerading as Afghan or Iraqi refugees, but actually were here to do the work of, and for, the Al Qaeda or other radical Islamist groups, such as the Lakshar Jihad, discussed below.

A persistent complaint that kept coming up in these conversation or relayed dialogues was: Why is it that the U.S. has not shown the same degree of interest to the other countries in South Asia, namely India and Sri Lanka and Bangladesh? These countries are also struggling with terrorist forces on their territories (or directed from across their respective borders). Do such forces not pose threats of their own to the world, whether in the form of terrorism or a nuclear bomb?

Unlike Bill Clinton, President Bush seems less interested in India (but for a lucrative economic tie-up and allowing India to continue with its nuclear enrichment program, supposedly for peaceful purposes, or perhaps to contain the regional threat of China and Iran). And Hindutva India, although it collects its largest funding from the diaspora Hindu sympathisers in North America, is, if one listens closely to Bal Thackeray and L K Advani (the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, and at the helm of the BJP, in the Indian Parliament), really no friend of the U.S.21 Even less so now that the U.S.’s derivative interest in, and unflinching support for, Pakistan is widely alleged in Indian media to have propelled more Islamic militant attacks inside India, and of course recurrently in Kashmir, than might have been the case had Pakistan been black-listed as the country that harboured and trained Taliban border-terrorists before 9/11.22 In these narrative scenarios, Musharraf’s apparent ‘180 degree turn-about’ has reportedly been compared to Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s switch from ‘Quit India’ campaign led by the combined Indian Congress and Muslim League [campaigns] to ‘Pakistan for Muslims’ (i.e. Divide then Quit India). In the long run however the U.S. diplomacy of ‘coddling Pakistan’ may not serve either parties well; and one could see the U.S.’s focus shifting more towards the
strategically significant and economically powerful India – or at least that is what some in the Indian intelligentsia would hope for.23

I heard a variant voice in Sydney, where the Hindu population is also slightly higher than in Melbourne, approximately 60,000. Regardless of the political opinions which individual members have held, the community and a few groups, such as the Ramakrishna Mission’s Vedanta Society and the Hindu Mandal, offered special pujas in their temples following both 9/11 and the Bali bombings. A two minute silence was also observed in honour of the departed souls. The President of one of the Hindu temple organisations in a letter to me commented:

True, Hindus do not differentiate people by religion. This is also true for Muslims, Jews, Christians, etc. All religions have spiritual beginnings and at the spiritual level God is without name or form. Misunderstanding of this concept is the main cause for the problem. Hindus do not subscribe to the concept of good and evil. But recognise truth and better truth. The same object or event will be seen differently by different people because of the existing difference in their degree of spirituality. A religious person need not be a spiritual person.

On the other hand, the informant did not blink as his reference-point shifted to the U.S. foreign policy and its blind spots in the outside world. There are territorial struggles going in Oceania as in other parts of the world; Australia had at first dismissed the Fretlin-led self-rule struggle of the East Timorese people, treating them as terrorists, when in fact they were fighting for sovereignty of their territory. The East Timorese, after their successful victory against Portuguese colonialism and Indonesia’s annexations, and despite recent set-backs, are looked upon as exemplary freedom-fighters for similar struggles by the natives of Papua (also known as Irian Jaya) and a plethora of liberation groups (mostly led by Muslim rebels and extremists alike) in the Philippines and in Aceh as well (which recently gained constitutional concessions from Indonesia). Political motivations are extremely complicated in these regions, on the part of those who are struggling for greater territorial (terra) rights and protection of their own native resources, such as natural gas and oil against Exxon-Esso’s interests, and native forestry against Chinese and Japanese woodchip interests, mediated often by multinational corporations based in the U.S. or Australia or the United kingdom.

Abu Sayyaf (Bearers of Sword), which for some time had been singled out as more extreme among the radical Islamist groups in the region, was a splinter movement from the Mora National Liberation Front (MNLF), founded in the 1960s as Mora Islamic Liberation Front. Abu Sayyaf emerged in the 1980s and Laksha Jihad was established as a network of clandestine Islamist struggles across the South East Asian region, through the interventions of the brother of Osama Bin Laden who visited Mindano in the Philippines in 1995. The latter group totally eclipsed and hijacked a more moderate liberation movement led by the earlier group that denounced the extreme violence of Lakshar Jihadis and their call for
Islamic (shar’ia) law in the region. Jameeh Islamiyah probably has closer links with this network than with any of the freedom groups in the area.

But there is probably little truth to the claim that there is a widespread, monolithic and radically nuanced Islamisation that has taken root in Indonesia, or in the archipelago at large. Certainly there is not enough truth in the claim such as to warrant that the U.S.A. and Australia should be so worried. Armein Reis, the Speaker of the Indonesian state legislature, and Abdurrahman Wahid, who between them command the allegiance of the majority of Muslims in Indonesia, have not been interested in politicising Islam. Rather, they have campaigned toward reforming Islam much along the lines of the visions of Fazrul Rahman (the Pakistani visionary who was expelled from Pakistan for his liberalism), and Nurcolash Masjid, who helped frame the Pancasila (Indonesia’s quasi-ecumenical governance principle) despite its ingrained foreclosures. These reformist Indonesian leaders remain firmly opposed to the call for Shari’at law in the region, recognising that there are Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and animists who share the culture and heritage of a more secular Indonesia. The same appears to be true of Malaysia. The Jameeh Islamiyah has become something of a focus after the Bali bombing and its supposed leader, Abu Bakar Bash’yir has confessed to the CIA of Al-Farqiqi’s (a Saudi émigré) links with the Al Qaeda operatives in the region. However, this should not distract one from the central teachings of Islam and the more liberal position that Indonesia has always taken on Islam’s role in shaping their society. Again, this recalls the argument of the scholars discussed earlier, that the extreme Islamist groups are speaking from the position of political and militant Islamism rather than of classical Islam or for the large percentage of Muslim people. This is a timely corrective.

But critics such as Salman Rushdie respond that harking back to classical Islam—the nostalgia for classicism “with its fine jurisprudential theories does not help us understand that contemporary Islam has gone through many changes in response to the challenges of modernity and the perceived threats of Western civilisation. In that historical timeframe “spanning some ten to twelve centuries” much can change, and as with all institutions the changes become part of the heritage, the tradition, which informs each new and subsequent reading of the text writ large in the cultural tapestry. That is why Islam is so different in different places and it is difficult to find unanimity on any deep issue among Muslims. And so my former colleague, Dr Greg Barton, is deeply worried that if the extremist Islamist trend is allowed to continue in the region it will derail the reformist process and catapult Indonesia into regression, thereby depriving the country of the right to enjoy McDonald burgers, Red Rooster Chicken and other fetish commodities and services made globally accessible by the neo-liberal corporatised syndicates.
The trope of the ‘sublime’ recalls the Kantian category of a free-standing aesthetic experience where there is a heightened sense of awe, wonder, and transport to other spaces. Although evoked by an object (such as a piece of art, or a sacred symbol, or even the Divine) the deep aesthetic sensibility suddenly feels detached from the objective as its presence becomes more subjective, or even other-worldly, hence transcendental.

Could 9/11 however have been a ‘sublime experience’? Would anyone have the bad taste to call this tragic event ‘sublime’? Perhaps no one has the bad taste to pronounce thus. But then someone, or some literati-types did, and the Associate Editor of *Sophia* wrote a short article on this suggestive speculation. It accompanied a masterful piece of art by a well-known Australian artist, that was to go on display in a gallery in Western Australia; but the entire exhibition was squashed for reasons not made apparent to anyone. The article was subsequently published in an issue of *Sophia*, with an editorial provided by Hutchings.26

It is now important to turn to Bali again, as I wish to explore a possible, or perhaps impossible, connection with the sublime here. What I was looking for among Hindus in Australia, in terms of a completely depoliticised and ritualised response to 9/11 and [the] terrorists attacks that have taken place since, I found among Balinese Hindus. The Balinese response borders on the possibility of the sublime, in the sense of an aesthetically sensitive spiritual response that does not undermine the gravity of the violence. Rather, the first response has been to see that the ‘souls’ (anuas) that have been viciously, and in an untimely moment, severed from their bodies find peace and an unencumbered onward journey. The elemental blessings that was conspicuously absent in official Australian services, except for church-sponsored services and in a smaller but unmarked ways in Hindu temples across the country, descended upon a shaken Australian people from quite an unexpected *disha*, direction. It came from Balinese Hindu gods who were invoked for precisely the task of cleansing the bad omens – not necessarily some undefined ‘evil’ - that had come to disturb the otherwise peaceful heavenly space.

A Balinese spokesman was reported as saying on the radio that the Balinese language, which is a more or less Sanskritised Indonesian bahasa, has no word for terrorism in its lexicon. They have not known such violence since the Majapahit kings pushed Javanese Hindus to the far corner of the archipelago. The exception to this was a disturbing incident in 1998 when a high profile Muslim Minister of Parliament questioned the suitability of Megawati Soekarnoputri for President, on the grounds that she was from a Hindu background in a predominantly Muslim nation. Balinese went on a rampage out of sheer anger at the gross insult on Hinduism implied by these comments.

But on the night of the Bali bombing anyone and everyone who was near the sites came out to help in the difficult rescue work, bringing with them food and
water, and rudimentary paramedical provisions to nurse and care for the injured and dying, regardless of whether they were locals or foreigners. Balinese civilians risked their lives through the fires to pull out helpless bodies. It is curious that the separating of the bodies of the deceased and injured by ‘colour’ or nationality was carried out by the Australian military and medical personal. Bali has not known the kinds of unprovoked murders, intrigues, violence, assassinations (actual and attempted), as well as communal- and police-military-instigated brutality seen in places like Jakarta, East Timor, Ambon, Aceh, and Sulewesi. One need not mention the conspiratorial links of politicians with transnational corporations, amassing and manipulating movement of arsenal and intelligence, sometimes in the paidout interests of sitting members of the ruling houses.

The peaceful co-existence of Balinese Hindus with their Muslim neighbours could be a model for other societies struggling with ethnic divisions and tensions. However, in recent times, Balinese Hindus have become somewhat apprehensive of Javanese Muslims moving into the Island in increasing numbers and setting up road-side shops, village mosques, and make-shift mechanics garages, which in this incident turned out to be one of the warehouses for the manufacture of the lethal bombs.

But the Balinese do not seem to hold an unrequited grudge or judgment about even those misguided radical Islamists, such as Samudara Imam, or toward the suicide bombers. All faithfully departed are graced with blessings in the ceremonies carried out. I recognised fine elements of shraddha37 ceremony that I have studied, witnessed, and which only recently had been part of my own personal life.

Conclusion

The reaction of members of the settled community toward the immigrant will have diverse influences on how the new immigrant settles in and adapts. As L and R Grinberg point not, while this factor has generally been recognised, what has not been commonly recognised is that the native [settled] community also feels the impact of the newcomer, for his presence modifies the group structure, can throw doubt on the community’s moral, political, or scientific ground rules, and can destabilise the existing group organization... It is not only the emigrant who feels his identity endangered; in a different way the community on the receiving end may feel that its cultural identity, the purity of its language, its beliefs, and its sense of group identity are also threatened.28

This has been borne out in the history of the new immigrants’ presence amidst the settled or settler community in Australia—and many studies have investigated and documented this phenomenon. However, what has changed in the aftermath of 9/11 is that an earlier immigrant community within the larger society, feeling threatened, has identified strongly with the ideological values of the settler community. The newcomer is an erstwhile neighbour in another context, or in the
former home. In this instance, it is the Hindu diasporic community that feels uncomfortable and destabilised in the presence of Muslims: not just Muslims making their passage to Australia but also Islam as an international presence in many parts of the world. Regardless of particular ethnic origin or which regional location such Muslims might belong to or come from, modern Hindus have an unsettled memory of the centuries of apparent tension and occasional bloodshed between their own kind and Muslims in the subcontinent.

During the British raj and the nationalist freedom struggle this communal divide led to the partitioning of India and the preservation of distinctive but gender-discriminatory personal law system.

The continuing presence of Muslims in India has become a symbol of the ‘failure’ of the Indian nation and its aspirations towards a true and vibrant democracy. The events of 9/11, it seems, have accentuated this suspicion in the eyes of many Hindus, both residing in India and in the larger diaspora; indeed, the Hindu Right led by the BJP has cunningly capitalised on the convergence of the threat of Islamism to external security and the internal threat to the purity of India. In February 2002, they set fire to a train near Godhra which carried Hindus returning from their pilgrimage to the reclaimed site of Ramjanmabhoomi in Ayodhya (the site where the Muslim mosque built by Babar supposedly stood over the birthplace of Rama). This act brought home a sad truth. For the incident unleashed a ruthless retaliation in Ahmedabad, by bands of young kar sevaks (Hindutva Ramboos) who went on a frenzied rampage for weeks, allegedly in cohort with the state authorities, that saw many more thousands of Muslims killed, raped, maimed or charred with kerosene and burning tyres strung over their bodies.

The same suspicion has spilled over towards Muslims with their clamorous call for jihadism in different corners of the world, but particularly in or from the Middle East and, to an extent, neighbouring Indonesia There is much that makes a Hindu wary of Muslims ‘with whom Gandhi apparently had such closeness and sympathies that he agreed to a separate state for their theocratic intentions. So was born Pakistan, which appears by all accounts to play off both sides in the international power struggle between the West and the rest. India and Pakistan have been in a state of declared and undeclared war since the 1960s.

Pakistan, saberating its own nuclear weapons, presumably as a defensive gesture against a (perceived) threat from India, and availing its territorial and airspace for American military action against Afghanistan, has also been accused of spilling scientific secrets to the Islamist hard-liners in Iran in their attempt to develop nuclear capabilities. The truth might be otherwise, but to an average Hindu the equivocations of General Musharraf and his playing the ‘strong man’ in all international endeavours to resolve the stand-off with India on the Jammu-Kashmir crisis, attest to the alleged distrustful nature (baimaani) of the ubiquitous ‘musulman’. The Sangh Parivar through its agencies such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which has
a strong presence in the diaspora, and the BJP and Shiv Sena, have not wasted
time in exploiting this growing discontent. While the Allied powers may not have
been able to persuade a secular India to join forces against the global ‘war on
terror’ (or reneged on India’s qualified offer), curiously they have found some
silent support in a section of the Hindu population, from Gujarat to Atlanta to
Melbourne.

Still, there are Hindus (Sri Lankan Tamils included) and a large number of
Indians of assorted persuasions who would distance themselves from such an
identification, finding it to be an unself-critical and untenable position. They would
also think that the sentiment of revenge and retaliation and the absolute confidence
with which violence is seen as the legitimate, even God-called response is a
disingenuous and a punitive reaction. And that such violence is disproportionate
to the unpardonable crime perpetrated by a band of fundamentalists. Such
extremists, they would point out, are to be found among Hindus, Christians, Israelis,
and perhaps even secularists as well.

Mahatma Gandhi’s message of tolerance for pluralism and his strategy of
nonviolence, which has paid huge dividends in nationalist struggles in recent history,
seem to have been forgotten. Emperor Akbar too has been forgotten. It is not the
religions or the religious people but rather a motley collection of self-made religionists
(jihadi-theologians), as Saeed and Devji with different nuances point out, that have
brought the world close to the brink of a catastrophic ‘clash of civilizations’. This
latter trope has sadly (and unwarrantedly) become something of a much-touted adage
“as if the world has known only two civilisations, both having their roots in the
Abrahamic monotheistic tradition. A questionable thesis gains a ring of truth because
someone whose voice is heard loud and wide – such as that of the radio broadcaster
in Melbourne during the 9/11 events” could ruefully proclaim: ‘After today’s events,
the world has changed forever’. Perhaps it has; perhaps it has not. Or that the post-
Westphalian world is entering an altered state of challenges.

Notes

1. A village oasis 150 km outside of Bangalore, India’s silicon-city. Shortly afterwards,
Baba, by Shashi Tharoor, a well-known Indian diasporic writer and Under Deputy Secretary
of the United Nations. Even though the events of September 11 did not feature in the
article, one may conjecture on such far-flung attempts by Indian thinkers domiciled and
working in New York to make sense of the events.

2. In personal conversation; although Prof Narayan also mentioned this in her interventions in
the AAR (American Academy of Religion) newsletter and public pleadings for calm and
tolerance and an ecumenical approach to the crisis that had just hit America.

3. RISA (Religion in South Asia)-List and private postings.

4. Gilmore cites Wright in the preamble to his article (see next note), that Wright wrote in
1941 referring to America’s decision to enter World War II. This is of course before the on-
set of the Cold War, the global phenomenon that made Wright increasingly weary and disenchanted with the same America, and hence he sought exile in Paris. I pledge my loyalty and allegiance, without mental reservation or evasions, to America. I shall through my writing seek to rally the Negro people to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Administration in a solid national front to wage war until victory is won.” —Richard Wright (December 16, 1941). For a recent biography of Wright, see Hazel Rowley, Richard Wright: The Life and Times, New York: Henry Holt, 2001.


6. I have since seen published speeches of at least one guru that to my mind confirms the cautious remarks, as vague as they are, that might portend some major disasters; although one of these remarks linked it somehow to the increase in sun-ray flares, whatever these are, perhaps some astrological omen, or having to do with vaastu, i.e. feng-chu like imbalance, that were reportedly later on worked out by Indian astrologers in the architectural structure of the WTC.

7. Thackerny has been reprimanded by the courts time and again for his threats of violence against minority groups and inciting communal dissensions.

8. Personal notes from the service and its recording by the Special Broadcasting Service that co-sponsored the gathering.


16. Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim Islam, the USA, and the Global War Against Terror, Delhi: Permanent Black (distributed by Orient Longman), 2005, pp. 163, 169; see also pp. 150-1, and 199.

17. I have developed some of these themes in my paper ‘The pseudo-secularization of Hindutva and its campaign for Uniform Civil Codes’ presented at the American Academy of Religion
annual meeting, Philadelphia, November 2005; therein, and implicitly in this passage also, I have drawn on the works of Appadurai, Amrit Basu, Faisal, Raka Ray, among others. See notes 21-23 below.

18. Aired in some journalese interpretation on a prominent current affairs program ‘4-Comers’, 28.10.02, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Public Television.


20. Cf Patrick Olivelle’s RISA-L (Religion in South Asia List) posting around this time.


23. The passage in Ganguly’s Introduction on ‘Coddling Pakistan’, which I invoke in the text, is particularly interesting, op cit, p. 10.

24. Greg Barton, ‘Neo-modernism revives Islam’, The Australian, Indonesia Supplement, September 24, 1993. According to Barton, ‘The world’s largest Islamic nation is in the grip of a religious revival. Those returning to Indonesia after an absence of 10 years or so, and who arrive when 165 million are observing Ramadan, are facing a big surprise: chances are that, when they meet old friends during this season of special religious devotion, they will find former agnostics fasting, praying and studying the Koran, and old drinking associates listening earnestly to taped sermons.’ See also Greg Barton, Indonesia’s Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004.


27. There are five major samskaras, life-cycle markers, in an individual’s progression on this earth that Hindus ritualise and ceremone: conception, birth, upaya (initiation), marriage, and death (antyeshti) or the last rites.

