

THE REIFICATION OF NEO-HINDUISM IN LIGHT OF ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION IN INDIA

In 1991, India surprisingly committed to a dismantling of the earlier socialist economy in favour of a more ‘liberalised’¹ economy, a move that came as a surprise to many.² A foreign exchange and balance of payments crisis necessitated a last-minute IMF loan contingent upon the mortgage of the Reserve Bank of India’s gold reserves and the loosening of restrictions upon private sector business activity.³ This was a radical departure from the Nehruvian socialism that had been the hallmark of postcolonial India and both the ‘License Raj’⁴ and ‘Hindu Rate of Growth’⁵ that had dominated Indian economic activity. India had finally come out of economic isolation and the forces of globalisation were now being felt by its then 846 million inhabitants.⁶ In this essay, I analyse the postliberalisation religious and political landscape in India to reflect the reification of neo-Hinduism as a reaction to economic globalisation.

Reification and Hinduism have a contentious relationship. W.C. Smith, in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, argues that “As an ideal, ‘Hinduism’ might conceivably be defined (though only by a

¹ Most of the discourse around the opening up of the Indian economy in 1991 refers to it as a liberalisation of the economy, and this is the nomenclature I draw from. See footnote #2 for an example of the usage of the term.

² Pedersen, Jørgen Dige. ‘Explaining Economic Liberalization in India: State and Society Perspectives’. *World Development*, vol. 28, no. 2, Feb. 2000, pp. 265–82. *ScienceDirect*, DOI:10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00132-1, p. 265.

³ *25 years of economic reform: Know all about 1991 Indian economic crisis*. ABP News, 25 July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYaIXWd9a2U>. ABP News is a Hindi news channel run by the Ananda Bazaar Patrika Group, one of the oldest continually running Indian media conglomerates.

⁴ The License Raj was a system of licenses and regulations that governed every aspect of Indian private sector business practice including production and pricing.

⁵ The Hindu Rate of Growth is defined as a 3.5% p.a. GDP growth and 1.3% p.a. rise in real per capita income. ‘Redefining The Hindu Rate Of Growth’. *The Financial Express*, 12 Apr. 2004, <https://www.financialexpress.com/archive/redefining-the-hindu-rate-of-growth/104268/>. *The Financial Express* is an Indian newspaper run under the aegis of *The Indian Express*, one of India’s oldest national papers.

⁶ India’s total population, including that of the state of Jammu & Kashmir, was 846.3 million according to the 1991 census. Vijayanunni, M. *1991 Census Handbook*. Government of India, 1996, http://censusindia.gov.in/DigitalLibrary/data/Census_1991/Publication/India/45969_1991_CHN.pdf, p. 2.

Hindu), but not as an historical reality.”⁷ Smith understands and articulates Hinduism as a fox distinct from other religions, which tend to be hedgehogs,⁸ for Hinduism, he admits, is a “a prodigiously variegated series of facts” that defies definition.⁹ Smith recognises the diversity that marks the myriad ways in which Hindus practice and conceive of religion.

The process of reification is defined as “mentally making religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity.”¹⁰ However, in the context of Hinduism, Smith argues that “the concept that these terms [‘terms conceptualizing teachings and norms’] formulated, and the most reified concept that either Hindus ... classically attained, signifies what we might call the doctrinal position of a particular sect or community.”¹¹ Gerald Larson, a scholar of Hinduism, provides a structured analysis of the different strains of Hinduism in postcolonial India.¹² The strand of Hinduism that attracted the particular attention of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]¹³ was what Larson terms “‘Neo-Hindu’ Hinduism,” and it is this that is being reified. Larson demarcates non-Gandhian

⁷ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Mentor Books, 1964, p. 130.

⁸ The metaphor of the hedgehog and the fox has its roots in Sir Isaiah Berlin’s essay, ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’. Berlin opens his essay by remarking that “There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing’.” Berlin further writes:

“For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel — a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance — and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.”

Berlin, Isaiah. “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. Edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, Chatto & Windus, 1997, pp. 436–498. p. 436.

⁹ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Mentor Books, 1964, p. 130.

¹⁰ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Mentor Books, 1964, p. 50.

¹¹ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Mentor Books, 1964, p. 55–56.

¹² Larson, Gerald J. “Independent India (1947–).” *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, et al. Brill Reference Online. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.

¹³ Lit. Trans.: National Volunteer Organisation.

Neo-Hindu Hinduism into two parts, namely “the *hindutva* ideology that tends to identify Hindu and/or Hinduism with Indic culture *tout ensemble*” and “the set of Hindu international missionary movements founded by revered *guru* figures or spiritual teachers.”¹⁴

It is in this context that the RSS was founded in 1925, an offshoot of 19th century Reform Movements that aimed to cleanse Hinduism of that which they found undesirable. Walter Andersen notes that “The organisation of that movement was, in large part, drawn from the Maharashtrian tradition — an organisation combining a gymnastic and military tradition, and a Hindu *math* (monastery). A programme emphasising gymnastics, Indian games, glorification of military and religious heroes, and the Brahminical concept of selfless service” was key to early RSS work.¹⁵ The early RSS aimed to unite Hindus against British rule and against foreign religions;¹⁶ in 1949, following Indian Independence, it adopted a formal constitution in which it elaborated its “Aims and Objects” as follows:

“The Aims and Objects of the Sangh are to weld together the diverse groups within the Hindu Samaj [trans. Society] and to revitalise and rejuvenate the same on the basis of its Dharma and Sanskriti [trans. Culture], that it may achieve an all-sided development of Bharatvarsha [trans. Land of Bharat].”¹⁷

¹⁴ While Larson clumps Gandhian Hinduism by rightly attributing the root of M.K. Gandhi’s beliefs in Hindu religious practice, as articulated in the pages of *Hind Swaraj* and affirmed by Gandhi throughout his life, Gandhian Neo-Hindu Hinduism was, as Larson admits, put into check with the constitutional separation of religion and state in Independent India for the first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had “little patience with the religious proclivities of Gandhi” — and so did Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. Larson, Gerald J. “Independent India (1947–).” *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, et al. Brill Reference Online. Web. 12 Aug. 2019.

¹⁵ Andersen, Walter. “The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: I: Early Concerns.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 7, no. 11, 1972, pp. 589–597. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4361126, p. 589.

¹⁶ Andersen, Walter. “The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: I: Early Concerns.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 7, no. 11, 1972, pp. 589–597. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4361126, p. 589.

¹⁷ Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. “Appendix IX: The Constitution of the RSS.” *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, pp. 273–83, pp. 274–75. All translations in brackets are my own.

In this essay, I will be focusing on the RSS and the Sangh Parivar¹⁸ and their role in the reification of Hinduism in post-liberalisation India. The RSS's constitution includes a singular mandate for uniting disparate groups within Hindu Society into what can be best described as an “objective systematic entity”¹⁹ — precisely what Smith calls reification. Furthermore, the RSS, with its 5 million members,²⁰ has access to the more than 100 million affiliate members²¹ through the Sangh Parivar. This is important because a reified Neo-Hinduism backed by the RSS has traction amongst the Indian populace and within diasporic Hindus.²² Past reform movements, especially during the Hindu Renaissance of 19th century Bengal, were “limited to a small circle”²³ and lacked national appeal and support.

The opening up of India's economy in 1991 caused rapid changes not just to income and wealth but also culture, and it was in this environment of rapid changes, reanimating Neo-Hindu Hinduism which had, until then, been kept in check with the secularism of post-Independence India. The ruling Bhartiya Janata Party [BJP] and the Vishva Hindu Parishad [VHP²⁴] are both members of the Sangh

¹⁸ Trans. Sangh family. This is a term commonly used to refer to organisations formally affiliated with the RSS. A comprehensive list is available here and includes the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party [BJP]: Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. “Appendix II.” *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, pp. 258–59.

¹⁹ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Mentor Books, 1964, p. 50.

²⁰ Gandhi, Priti. ‘Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh: How the World's Largest NGO Has Changed the Face of Indian Democracy’. *DNA India*, 15 May 2014, <https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/standpoint-rashtriya-swayamsewak-sangh-how-the-world-s-largest-ngo-has-changed-the-face-of-indian-democracy-1988636>. *DNA* is a national broadsheet newspaper.

²¹ The BJP itself had 100 million members in 2018 [1 crore = 10 million], and this number is still growing. Other Sangh Parivar members have millions of other members — even as of 1996 — as Christophe Jaffrelot shows in his book, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. Chatterjee, Mohua. ‘Narendra Modi Heaps Praise on Amit Shah as BJP Membership Touches 10 Crore’. *The Times of India*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Narendra-Modi-heaps-praise-on-Amit-Shah-as-BJP-membership-touches-10-crore/articleshow/46790420.cms>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

²² For more on diasporic Hinduism and its ties with the RSS, see: Jaffrelot, Christophe. “The Diaspora and Hindu Nationalism.” *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 361–369.

²³ Bose, Sugata and Ayesha Jalal. *Modern South Asia*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2004, p. 88.

²⁴ Lit. Trans. World Hindu Council.

Parivar, a body of organisations affiliated strongly with the RSS.²⁵ The VHP was founded in 1966 by the RSS to “unite all faiths of Indian origin, ‘all those faiths and beliefs that have sprouted from the banyan tree’.”²⁶ However, in fulfilment of this aim, it did not hold a *dharamsansad* [trans. Religious Parliament] until 1984, where 558 acharyas and gurus from 76 different traditions of Hindu praxes and thought convened in Bombay accompanied by the four esteemed Shankaracharyas; this parliament passed a 12-point reification agenda defining what was acceptable Hinduism and goals for Hindus.²⁷ By 2006, 9667 gurus and acharyas gathered in six cities across India to debate vital issues of religion and adopted resolutions like #03, which insisted the government declare the Bhagwad Gita as India’s “national scripture”.²⁸ Aalok Kumar, the working president of the VHP, explained in a televised interview that:

This *dharamsansad* will think about the state and the condition of Hindu society. It will illuminate the path forward. ... I do not know how to discriminate between big and small saints. We’ve invited everyone and I feel that the nation’s universally respected [religious figures], such big figures, such renowned figures, will be here on our platform, and in such big numbers that this *dharamsansad* will think about everything [under the sun].²⁹

These *dharamsansads* represent a conscious effort on part of the VHP to bring religious leaders from different religious traditions together to craft a unified Hinduism within a structure of rigid openness.

²⁵ Damle and Andersen ascertain that the “organizational cohesion” of the Sangh Parivar is largely due to “the *sangathan mantri* model, first adopted by the political affiliate ... [where] key organizational positions — almost always including the role of general secretary — are held by full-time pracharakas” of the RSS. Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, p. 22.

²⁶ M.S. Gowalkar quoted in Smith, David. *Hinduism and Modernity*. Blackwell Pub, 2003, p. 189.

²⁷ ‘Dharma Sansad I’. *Vishva Hindu Parishad*, <https://vhp.org/conferences/dharmasansads/dharma-sansad-1/>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

²⁸ The Dharma Sansad ‘reports’ do not necessarily reflect the full extent of activities conducted at these events, but these are the only official public documentation for these events. ‘Dharma Sansad II’. *Vishva Hindu Parishad*, <https://vhp.org/conferences/dharmasansads/dharma-sansad-ii/>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

²⁹ The Working President, Aalok Kumar, remarks that the *dharamsansad* will “हिन्दू समाज की दशा पर और दिशा पर विचार करती है। आगे के लिए मार्गदर्शन करती हैं। ... संतों में बाड़ा छोटा करना आता नहीं है। हमने सबको न्यौता दिया है और मुझे लगता है की देशभर में सर्वमान्य ऐसे बड़े लोग, पहचाने वाले लोग, ऐसे एक बड़ी संख्या में हमारी मंच पर होंगे, और इतनी बड़ी संख्या में होंगे की यह धर्मसंसद पूरे हिन्दू समाज का प्रतिविविध करे, यह होगा।” Translation is my own, and words in brackets are used to effectively convey the idiomatic meaning of the language employed in this case. *VHP’s Working President Alok Kumar Explains Motive Behind Dharma Sansad*. ABP News, 31 Jan. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpBISBzEPWQ>.

The aims for future *dharamsansads* and for the future of Hinduism were thus articulated in the first *dharamsansad*:

“To prescribe the Dharmic guidelines for the growth of integration amid Hindu society in the perspective of modern era; To prescribe guidelines for eradication of social evils like corruption, untouchability and dowry for creation of a healthy society; To dispel illusions about sublime traditions created by Dharma, Sanskriti, Language and great personalities and rekindle deeper faith in them.”³⁰

This is not to say that the process of Neo-Hindu canon formation and discursive exposition on Hindu traditions, texts, and customs has not seen conflict. The 2014 *dharamsansad* saw conflict between followers of Sai Baba, a 19th century Maharashtrian godman, and those of the Shankaracharyas, who are the heads of the four most prominent monasteries in the Advaita Vedanta tradition.³¹

Table 1: Attendance at VHP Dharamsansads³²

Year	Religious Figures Attending
1984	558
1985	851
1989	3000
1991	4000
1993	5000
1994	10500
1996	3000
2001	6000
2003	9000
2006	9667

These *dharamsansads* are now held in conjunction with the biennial Kumbh Mela, and while attendance data is non-existent from 2006 onwards, the trend towards incorporating more high-profile religious leaders with both mass followings and traditional theological sanction, like the yoga guru Baba

³⁰ ‘Dharma Sansad 1’. *Vishva Hindu Parishad*, <https://vhp.org/conferences/dharmasansads/dharma-sansad-1/>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

³¹ ‘Dharma Sansad becomes challenging ground between devotees of Shirdi Sai, Shankaracharya’. *Halla Bol*, Aaj Tak, 26 Aug. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_L8oehqAx2o.

³² This data is sourced from the VHP’s official reports.

Ramdev — who also runs a billion dollar FMCG empire — and the Shankaracharyas, who enjoy theological and traditional superiority of the *primus inter pares* genus.

In the immediate period following the economic globalisation, “Hindus for the first time mobilised massively behind the RSS-VHP-BJP combination.”³³ A 2019 Pew poll showed that 54% Indians believed that religion plays a more important role in India compared to 1999, and 53% favour a more important role for religion in the country.³⁴ Another Pew poll showed that only 4% of Indians do not think the Indian way of life must be protected against foreign influence, the lowest amongst all countries polled; on the converse, 76% believe that the Indian way of life *must* be protected against foreign influence.³⁵ However, this animosity does not extend to economic liberalisation³⁶ — Indians believe that they are better off than they were under the highly regulated economy of the past. As early as 1988, following the technocratic reforms of the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress government, writers like Rajni Sharma were bemoaning the homogenisation of India — “Therefore what one finds is a secular convergence between the techno-managerial rationality of running the globe that controls or wants to control the national economy and the communal rationality.”³⁷ Within five years of the reforms, the

³³ Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 527.

³⁴ Poushter, Jacob, et al. ‘How People around the World View Religion’s Role in Their Countries’. *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project*, 22 Apr. 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/22/how-people-around-the-world-view-religions-role-in-their-countries/>.

³⁵ *Views of a Changing World, 2003: Chapter 5. Nationalism, Sovereignty and Views of Global Institutions*. Pew Research Center, 3 June 2003, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2003/06/03/chapter-5-nationalism-sovereignty-and-views-of-global-institutions/>.

³⁶ Devlin, Kat. ‘A Sampling of Public Opinion in India’. *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project*, 25 Mar. 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/03/25/a-sampling-of-public-opinion-in-india/>.

³⁷ Kothari, Rajni. ‘Class and Communalism in India’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 23, no. 49, 1988, pp. 2589–92. JSTOR, p. 2592. The *EPW* is a peer-reviewed journal of social sciences in India, much like a journal of record, and is often described as being left-wing. However, it still retains pre-eminence in the study of Indian social sciences.

rapid cultural change was evident.³⁸ This postliberalisation period was important because “a very large number of Indians ... [were] getting to see the outside world for the first time.”³⁹ Satya Sharma further notes the irreversibility of this economic reform and the resultant cultural transformation: “In a land traditionally known for frugality, idealism, *dharma*, *karma*, transcendentalism, vegetarianism, religious tolerance and *ahimsa*, we find a clear break.”⁴⁰

Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris used data from the pooled World Values Survey to show the increasing right orientations as “measured by the 10-point left-right ideology scale where 1=left and 10=right” in conjunction with a numerical determinant of religious values to show that there is a strong relationship between the two, and that this relation has strengthened in India from $R=0.157$ in the early 1990s to $R=0.368$ in the mid-1990s.⁴¹ Walter Andersen and Sridhar Damle cite Norris and Inglehart’s study and book when they note that:

“India’s recent and rapid social and economic development, we propose, is positively related to the growth in the number of RSS shakhas, as well as increasing participation rates in the various affiliates. ... the bonds of community and family advocated by the RSS ‘have a salience to those who feel rootless’, and this is especially true in the case of ‘developing countries where new economic and administrative systems have rapidly undermined institutions and moral certitudes which traditionally defined a person’s social function and relationship to authority’.”⁴²

This cultural change, remarkably, has much to do with increased prosperity as well. Rachel Dwyer examines film culture in India to conclude that this ‘new middle class’ has strong links to the rise of

³⁸ Sharma, writing in 1996, writes astutely about the economic and sociocultural changes that marked post-liberalisation India. Sharma, Satya P. ‘The Cultural Costs of a Globalized Economy for India’. *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 3/4, 1996, pp. 299–316. JSTOR.

³⁹ Sharma, Satya P. ‘The Cultural Costs of a Globalized Economy for India’. *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 3/4, 1996, pp. 299–316. JSTOR, p. 303.

⁴⁰ Sharma, Satya P. ‘The Cultural Costs of a Globalized Economy for India’. *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 3/4, 1996, pp. 299–316. JSTOR, p. 311.

⁴¹ Data for later iterations is unavailable, and the space for the 2000s is left empty in the table. Norris, Pippa. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 207.

⁴² Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, p. XVI.

communal Hindu identity, of which the RSS is the primary mover and shaker.⁴³ Increased prosperity and a burgeoning middle class have both contributed to the ranks of the RSS, and it is this group — “largely urban, middle-class”⁴⁴ — that has seen the largest increase in RSS membership and activism, which for Leela Fernandes lies in an embracing and then pushback against “middle-class uncertainty.”⁴⁵ The popularity of the Sangh Parivar is “resurgence of an angry, alienated middle class that has sought to reclaim its national primacy” in light of a perceived abrogation of the middle-class’ mandate by the Congress.⁴⁶

The Neo-Hinduism that the VHP posits and the RSS and the Sangh Parivar propagate is deeply concerned with the Trinity of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer, along with their incarnations and the two Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.⁴⁷ The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are predicated upon virtue and righteous war and conduct, especially in light of family ties. This neo-Hinduism resonates with those who find their cultural identity under assault from the forces of globalisation that pushed India out of its insularity and exposed it to the larger world. A steadfastly militant push for reclamation of identity in face of radical change forced popular

⁴³ Dwyer, Rachel. ‘Zara Hatke: The New Middle Classes and the Changing Forms of Hindi Cinema’. *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life*, edited by Henrike Donner, Routledge, 2011, pp. 184–208, p. 186.

⁴⁴ Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Fernandes, Leela. *India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 25.

⁴⁶ Fernandes, Leela. *India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 180.

⁴⁷ While it is true that both epics have immense diversity in their articulations, the development of a genre of epic television programmes like Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* (1987) and B.R. Chopra’s *Mahabharata* (1988) advanced a popular version of both epics on national television, and have contributed significantly to the homogenization of these epics in the national vision. Both were aired on Doordarshan, the only television channel in India until 1992, with a combined viewership of over a billion people.

Hinduism, as articulated by neo-Hinduism, to the creation of an “objective systematic entity.”⁴⁸ The various doctrinal sects of Hinduism have, since the globalisation reforms, entered into “a mutually beneficial relationship” with the larger Sangh Parivar — “the sects provide a spiritual and social anchor that the Sangh’s constituency craves, especially in a time of social, economic and political change”; in exchange, these sects “have been catapulted on to a bigger platform.”⁴⁹

This is seen through the growth of the RSS, which positions itself as a civilizational organisation. While growth in the RSS Shakhas during the preliberalisation period was remarkably linear and capitalised on the momentum it gained from the defence of civil liberties it mounted during the Indira Gandhi-imposed Emergency (1975–77).

Table 2: Number of RSS Shakhas from 1977–2019⁵⁰

Year	Shakhas	Annual Change
1988	25000	–
1994	30288	881
2010	39897	601
2012	40922	513
2013	44982	4060
2014	51355	6373
2015	56859	5504

⁴⁸ Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. Mentor Books, 1964, p. 50.

⁴⁹ While Sud is writing particularly about the state of Gujarat throughout her book, in this section of her argument she makes particular references to immensely popular sects, all of which worship some part of the Trinity and the two epics. For example, BAPS is a Vaishnavite sect. Sud, Nikita. *Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism, and the State: A Biography of Gujarat*. University Press, 2012, p. 145.

⁵⁰ ‘Annual Report 2019’. *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, <http://rss.org/Encyc/2019/3/8/rss-annual-report-2019.html>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

‘Annual Report 2017’. *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, <http://rss.org/Encyc/2017/3/23/rss-Annual-Report-2017-English.html>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

Jha, Ajit Kumar, and Mahurkar, Uday. ‘United Colours of RSS’. *India Today*, 25 Apr. 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20160425-rashtriya-swayamsevak-sangh-rss-sangh-parivar-mohan-bhagwat-828762-2016-04-14>.

2016	56569	-290
2017	57233	664
2018	58967	1734
2019	59266	299

In the 31 year period between 1988 and 2019,⁵¹ the number of RSS shakhas increased by 137% from 25000 to almost 60000, significantly outpacing the population growth rate. However, it is not just the shakhas that have experienced a significant and long-term revival with economic globalisation. Two affiliates, the BJP and the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan [Vidya Bharati], are wider examples of this move towards a stronger and more focused neo-Hinduism and its institutionalisation.

Table 3: Number of Students in Vidya Bharati Schools⁵²

Year	Students
1991	1200000
2003	1700000
2016	3200000
2019	3475757

Vidya Bharati schools are spread all over the country, and is the “largest non-government scholastic system in India.”⁵³ The schools draw from the activities of the Sangh Parivar and proffer a ‘dharmic’ education, along with standard instruction for fulfilment of state or national board examinations at the end of Grade 10 and 12. The number of students in Vidya Bharati schools has almost tripled since the

⁵¹ I picked this date range because 1988 is the latest date I could procure for for preliberalisation shakhas, while 2019 was the latest for postliberalisation data.

⁵² Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 269.

‘PM Modi Urges Vidya Bharati Schools to Aim for Excellence’. *The Indian Express*, 13 Feb. 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/vidya-bharati-akhil-bharatiya-shiksha-sansthan-pm-modi-urges-vidya-bharati-schools-to-aim-for-excellence/>.

‘Schools’. *Vidya Bharti Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan*, <http://vidyabharti.net/schools>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

⁵³ Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, p. 6.

globalising reforms of 1991, a meteoric rise that has been assisted strongly by “the BJP’s control of the government [which] provides the RSS and its affiliates unparalleled opportunities to influence policy, particularly important for the educational affiliates like the Vidya Bharati and the Ekal Vidyalaya.”⁵⁴

Since 1991, the BJP has been able to make significant inroads into the political arena.

Table 4: BJP Seats in the Lok Sabha⁵⁵

Year	Seats in Lok Sabha
1984	2
1989	88
1991	120
1996	161
1998	178
1999	182
2004	138
2009	116
2014	282
2018	303

Save for a spate of 10 years between 2004–14, the BJP has led the coalition forming the government in India for most of the postliberalisation period. With over a 100 million members, the BJP is the world’s largest political party, dwarfing current Congress membership by an order of magnitude.⁵⁶ Additionally, the spread of the BJP as a political party is impressive, for it has managed to move behind the Hindi

⁵⁴ Andersen, Walter K., and Shridhar D. Damle. *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India*. Hurst & Company (Publishers) Ltd., 2019, p. 76.

⁵⁵ I have only included the BJP in this because coalition partners do not necessarily articulate their vision for India within the RSS-approved neo-Hinduism matrix. ‘Statistical Reports’. *Election Commission of India*, <https://eci.gov.in/statistical-report/statistical-reports/>. Accessed 14 Aug. 2019.

⁵⁶ Chatterjee, Mohua. ‘Narendra Modi Heaps Praise on Amit Shah as BJP Membership Touches 10 Crore’. *The Times of India*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Narendra-Modi-heaps-praise-on-Amit-Shah-as-BJP-membership-touches-10-crore/articleshow/46790420.cms>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.

heartland to states as diverse as Jammu & Kashmir, Mizoram, and Karnataka, morphing into a serious national party.

While in 1991, the neo-Hinduism of the RSS was simply a ‘religion of revolution,’⁵⁷ with the ascendancy of the BJP, this neo-Hinduism is the recipient of governmental backing and institutional support from outside and inside the Sangh Parivar — it is now a reified, institutionalised concern. The RSS’s reification of neo-Hinduism in light of economic globalisation is a phenomenon that is unlikely to diminish in momentum, popularity, and vigour. In the face of a popularly perceived erosion of identity and a string of electoral misfortunes that have rocked the stalwart of Indian secularism, the Indian National Congress, the RSS and the extended Sangh Parivar — a fox that knows many things — will continue down the path of a reified popular Neo-Hindu Hinduism within a framework of rigid openness.

⁵⁷ Lincoln defines religions of revolution as: “Religions of revolution, on the other hand, define themselves in opposition to the dominant social fraction itself, not its religious arm alone, promoting direct action against the dominant fraction’s material control of society.” Lincoln, Bruce. *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 85.

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